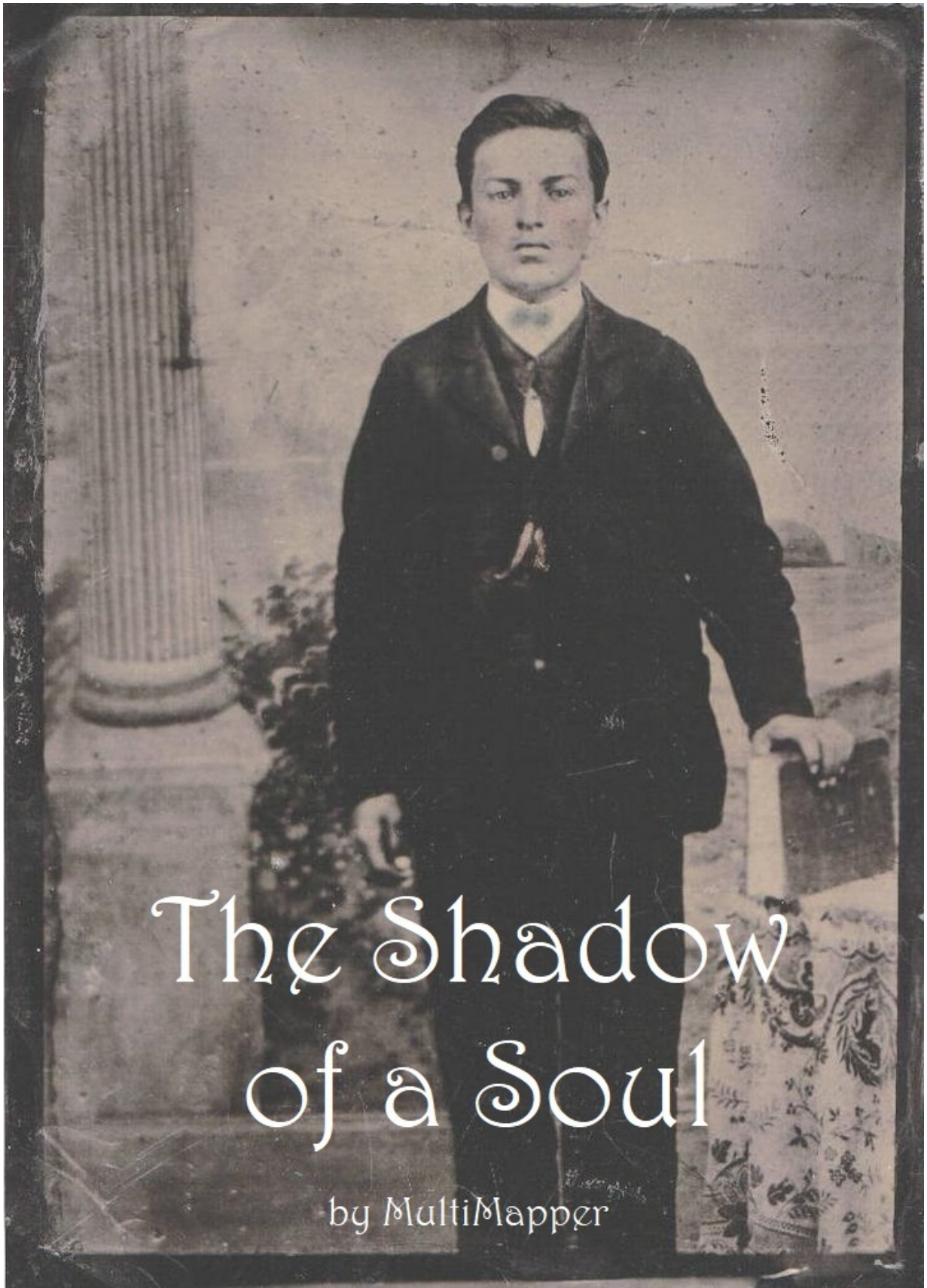




The Shadow of a Soul

by MultiMapper



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Chapter 1: Destination - Hell

11:11am... 111° F!

{She moved us to hell!} I thought to myself as I looked at the bank sign repeating the time and temperature.

"Oh you're awake. We'll be there in just a few minutes. I just called your grandfather and he's going to meet us at the house." Mom said cheerfully.

"Great." I said with my sarcasm turned up full blast as the car pulled out of a parking lot and into the street.

"Try to think of this as a new beginning. Maybe you'll be able to make some friends here." Mom said in a cheerful voice that was verging on perky.

"Does this place we're going to live have air conditioning?" I asked hesitantly.

"Not exactly." Mom responded quietly.

"What does 'not exactly' mean... exactly?" I asked suspiciously.

"It'll just be better if I show you when we get there. Don't worry, I just know you're going to love the new house." Mom said with a big happy smile. All the teeth were present and accounted for.

"You won't believe how big it is." Mom continued in a bubbly voice.

{Right. It's probably some run down shack in the middle of the desert.} I thought to myself.

"It's been so long since I've been here. Everything's changed so much." She said as she looked around.

I looked out the window.

Holy Shit! You can see the heat!

I mean, you can actually SEE the fucking HEAT!

It's rising up in waves from the pavement.

As I looked around I noticed that there was no grass, just clumps of weeds that looked like dried out, sun baked straw.

No trees.

I looked around to be sure and confirmed that there were no trees anywhere. It was barren, desolate and completely hostile to every living

thing.

As we continued down the road there were fewer and fewer houses and more... nothing.

{The bitch is insane.} I said to myself as I looked out over the nothingness.

"That's where we're going." Mom said with triumph and made a left turn.

I rested back and closed my eyes as I thought, {Four days ago I was at home. There was grass, trees, a lake or stream within walking distance in any direction...}

"That's the road to your grandparents house." Mom said with excitement.

{I care.} I thought sarcastically as I made a show of looking at a dirt road that led off to nowhere that could be seen.

"It's just been too many years since I've been here." Mom said in fond memory.

I glanced around to see that we had left anything that could remotely be called civilization and were traveling down a perfectly straight road that seemed to continue on into infinity.

The car swerved and I turned my attention to the road in front of us.

It looked like a dried out piece of hedge was being blown across the road by the wind.

"I haven't seen a tumbleweed in years." Mom said with a delighted giggle.

I looked at her with horror as I thought, {Tumbleweed? I always thought that was something someone just made up for the old Western TV shows!}

I looked behind the car to see the tumbleweed continue on it's merry way across the road.

"Here's our turn!" Mom said with joy.

A dirt road. More of those tumbleweed things and... A cactus! A real cactus!

Not the kind that looks like a man with his arms up, but the other kind, the ones that are about the shape of beaver tails and covered with spines.

I was distracted from any further thought as the car bucked and rattled down the uneven dirt road.

"There it is!" Mom said with delight as she pointed into the distance.

And there it was.

Like the house on the hill in 'Psycho', the huge ancient structure stood out as the only feature on the barren landscape.

It was huge! I've seen smaller hotels than this place.

"Dad's been coming by every few weeks and checking on the place, keeping it up until one of us kids wanted to take it over." Mom chattered happily.

"No one's really lived here since granddad died in '78. But whenever one of us kids comes to visit, we usually end up staying here."

As we continued to drive, the house seemed to get bigger and bigger.

"Dad says that we lost the smokehouse year before last to a twister, but he just bulldozed what was left since no one used it anyway." Mom said as we finally pulled up in front of the house.

Some old geezer who I'm guessing is my grandfather ran to the car to greet us.

Mom opened her door as he said, "Patsy! You made good time. I bet you're pooped."

"When I hit Wichita Falls last night I knew I had to drive straight through. I thought I was going to have to stop in Lubbock, but there was no way I could stop and sleep when I was only two and a half hours away." Mom said happily as she stood and pulled grandpa into a hug.

"I've got the master bedroom fixed up for you so you can rest. I didn't know which room Little Markey would want so I left the rest be." Grandpa said seriously as he led mom away from the car.

{'Little Markey'. Oh yeah, that's just what I need.} I thought as I opened my car door.

HEAT!

Scorching, hell-fire, heat.

I fought to catch my breath as I felt my skin draw up tight as a drum. A prickly feeling washed over me as I stepped out of the air conditioned car.

"Come on in the house Markey. Your grandmother sent over a gallon of sun tea for y'all." Grandpa said with cheer from the porch.

I closed the car door and walked toward the house.

After two steps I noticed that I could feel the heat from the ground coming up through the soles of my shoes.

After stepping up on the porch I turned around to look at the view from my new home.

Flat as far as the eye could see in every direction.

No trees, no other buildings, no color... nothing.

There was dirt and scraggly weeds all the way to the horizon.

I truly AM in hell.

* * * * *

The temperature inside the house was considerably cooler.

"As soon as you called to say that you were coming I came over and started getting the place set up. I checked out all the swamp coolers and put all new pads in 'em... well, your cousin Joe Bob took care of that part, but I supervised." Grandpa finished sheepishly as he led us through a big entry hall.

Joe Bob? No way. Nobody ever really named their kid Joe Bob... did they?

"Thanks for taking care of that Dad. How's cousin Joe Bob doing now? I heard that he was out of work for a while." Mom asked with interest as we walked into a huge kitchen.

"He got a good job over at the plastics plant on the South side of Odessa. Lindie was all worried about him working around hazardous chemicals, but with a little one on the way they can't afford to be too choosy." Grandpa said seriously.

"Another one? How many does that make?" Mom asked as she pulled some glasses out of the cabinet and started filling them with ice from the freezer.

"This'll be number nine. You'd think they would've figured out what causes that by now, wouldn't you?" Grandpa said with a chuckle as he went to the refrigerator and pulled out a gallon jug of tea.

Mom smiled and shook her head as Grandpa handed the tea to her.

"From the looks of it, it won't be very long before Little Markey's gonna be givin you some grandkids." Grandpa said with a sly smile at me.

"Dad, he's only fourteen." Mom said in a warning tone.

"Like I said..." Grandpa trailed off with a smile.

Mom handed me a glass of tea and I was shocked by how cold the glass felt in my hand.

"Well, I've got to be gettin back to the farm soon. As nice as it is to have you here, the chores still need doin. It looks like it could get hot today so I want to be sure all the livestock have plenty of water." Grandpa said seriously, then took a long drink of tea.

I took a careful sip of the iced tea and stopped in wonder.

I didn't even realize I was thirsty, but the cold sweet tea felt like the most wonderful thing I'd ever tasted.

"Your mom is going to expect you to come over for dinner tonight." Grandpa said before taking another long drink of tea.

"Dad, I've been driving for almost thirty hours. Once I hit that bed I doubt that I'll be getting up for a long while." Mom said seriously.

"Okay Patsy, I'll tell your mother. Do you two have enough food for tonight?" Grandpa asked curiously.

"Yeah. We packed enough food for two families. We'll be fine and I'll go shopping tomorrow." Mom said seriously.

"Well just remember not to buy any eggs. We'll be providing all the eggs you'll be needing." Grandpa warned.

"I'll remember. Now if you'll excuse me..." Mom said shyly and hurried out of the room.

"Well Little Markey, how are you liking West Texas so far?" Grandpa asked as he put an arm around my shoulders.

"I guess it's okay in a post-apocalyptic way. But, would you please just call me Mark?" I asked hesitantly, not wanting to upset him.

Grandpa looked at me seriously for a moment, then broke into a big smile.

"You've got a deal Mark. I'll tell you a secret if you'll promise not to spread it around." Grandpa said in a whisper.

I nodded.

"I have little kid names for all my kids and grandkids. I only stop calling them by their kid names when they've got the balls to stand up to me and ask me to stop. I was afraid you was gonna grow up to be a wussy city kid

but you've only been here one day and you've already proved to me that you're gonna be fine no matter where you are." Grandpa finished with a proud smile.

"Thanks Grandpa." I said as I pulled him into a hug.

"Welcome home." Grandpa said happily as he held me.

"Sorry about that, I've been needing a pit stop since Seagraves." Mom said shyly as she walked back into the kitchen.

Grandpa smiled as he said, "I have to be going now Patsy. I'll be by to check on you and Mark first thing in the morning. I'll bring fresh eggs with me so you'll have something for breakfast."

"Thanks Dad. It's really good to be home." Mom said and walked over to give Grandpa a great big hug.

"Sometime after you've rested we'll sit down and have a long talk about the divorce and your plans for the future." Grandpa said seriously.

"Yeah. We'll do that." Mom said quietly.

Grandpa pulled out of the hug and started walking toward the door as he said, "You two remember to stay inside for a few days until you get used to the West Texas weather again."

Mom chuckled and said, "From the look on Mark's face when we arrived, I don't think that's going to be a problem."

Grandpa smiled at me and said in a gentle voice, "Just give it a fair chance Mark. Don't let first impressions guide your life."

"Okay Grandpa." I said seriously.

Grandpa opened the door to go outside and I could see waves of heat radiating up off the parched earth.

"Yep, it looks like its warming up." Grandpa said with a smile, then closed the door behind him as he left.

* * * * *

"Mark, I really need to get some sleep. Would you mind bringing in the ice chest and putting the food away?" Mom asked with the most exhausted look I've ever seen.

"Sure Mom. I'll take care of it." I said as she led the way to the stairs.

"While I'm sleeping you can pick whichever bedroom you want and either take a nap or start moving in." Mom said as she climbed the wide staircase.

I followed her until we reached the top of the staircase and she said, "That's my room. Wake me up if you need anything."

"I'll be fine. Go to sleep and I'll see you in the morning." I said seriously.

Mom pulled me into a quick hug, then hurried into her room.

* * * * *

I decided not to put it off and went downstairs to get the ice chest.

When I opened the front door, I couldn't believe how hot it was outside.

I've heard about it being so hot you could fry an egg on the sidewalk, but I swear that if I had a sidewalk, I could fry the whole damned chicken on it.

I hurried to the car and opened the door.

The temperature inside the car must have been twenty degrees hotter than outside.

My original plan had been to unpack everything from the car while mom was sleeping, but in light of this new development the plan was downgraded to just grabbing my backpack and the ice chest.

By the time I wrestled the ice chest free from the back seat of the car and got it to the porch, I was drenched in sweat.

When I walked into the front door of the house it was like walking into paradise. The cool moist air was gently blowing from the vent pointed at the door and I just had to stop and take a few seconds to enjoy it.

Eventually, I sat the backpack by the staircase and went to the kitchen to put away the food.

We just had some sandwiches, vegetables, soft drinks and a couple apples. Nothing too complicated but more than enough to get us through one night.

Besides, there were chips and things still in the car, but they would be fine out there until later.

On impulse, I poured myself another glass of iced tea and took a long drink before heading upstairs.

* * * * *

The first room was for a girl. Not just any girl, but a foo-foo girly girl.

The next room was okay but... well, I just wanted to look at the rest. There was basic bedroom furniture and some really boring landscape pictures on the walls. If there weren't any better rooms. It would do.

The room beside mom's was a nursery. All the toys and things had been taken out, but there were still scenes of nursery rhymes painted in murals on all the walls and a crib without a mattress set up in the corner. I toyed with the idea for a minute. The old faded out murals and stuff were kind of creepy and cool. but the deciding factor was the connecting door to my mother's bedroom.

In a word, 'no'.

I walked past my mom's room and checked out the next room which was some kind of study or library or something.

I'm not much of a reader, but with the entertainment possibilities that I've seen around here so far... it could happen.

The next bedroom was... plain. The walls were bare. Plain beige drapes covered the windows. There wasn't one ornamental thing in the entire room.

I left that room quickly and hurried to the next to find the door locked.

That piqued my interest.

Let's see... A big new house, an afternoon with nothing better to do, a complete lack of parental supervision and a locked door.

You do the math.

It was an old lock, but still good enough to keep me out.

I started by feeling above the door facing, in case it was one of those 'to keep the kids out' things.

No luck.

My next thought was to check in the desk drawers of the study.

My reasoning was that desk drawers are the place where useless crap that doesn't belong anywhere else ends up. Keys fit very well into that category.

Again, no luck.

I thought about it for a minute, then decided to do a brief search of the downstairs rooms to check the most likely places.

After looking through the kitchen drawers and coming up empty, I walked into a room that appeared to have once been the back porch of the house,

but had been enclosed and made into a sort of a combination mud room and pantry.

I looked around and didn't see any likely places where a key might be kept.

As I turned to go back to the kitchen to try my luck in the cabinets, I noticed a key hanging on a nail all the way at the top of the door frame.

Bingo. Out of the reach of children. In a place where the adults could remember where it was. It had a good shot at being the key I was looking for.

I took the key and hurried upstairs to see what was hidden behind the door.

I put the key in the lock and had to jiggle it before I felt it give a little.

I applied just a little more force and the slide bolt slowly released.

I turned the knob and walked in to see what was so important that it needed to be kept locked up.

* * * * *

No one had been in this room in years... decades.

There was a layer of dust covering everything that was nearly a quarter inch thick.

I took one step in and noticed that there were cobwebs draping over everything in the room.

Something suddenly struck me as being the most unusual feature of this room.

All the other rooms had been emptied. There were a few general pieces of furniture in place, but the personal things were all gone.

Whoever had lived in this room had left everything here. There was even a book still opened on the desk.

I looked at the room in general and felt that of all the places that I'd been in the entire house, this is the one place that I could really call home.

A strange quiet wheezy sound caught my attention and I looked over the door to find that the cooler vent was turned off to this room.

Okay, I'm not really good about thinking things through before I do them.

I don't choose to do stupid things, but sometimes....

Well anyway, I opened the vent.

Let's just say that the layer of dust that was laying on top of everything was now a cloud.

I quickly ran through the room and pulled back the drapes.

The bright sunlight shining on the swirling dust must have been playing tricks on my eyes because out of the corner of my eye, I swear that I saw someone standing there, just a foot away from me.

It was so real that I did one of those full body flinches that nearly stops your heart.

When I looked at it straight on, I could see there was nothing there, but let me tell you, it spooked the hell out of me.

The need for 'dust free' air was quickly becoming more important to me, so I diverted my attention to opening the window.

The latch on the window was ancient and must not have been used for half a century so it took a little effort to get it to release.

But finally the thing gave way and I was able to move on to my next challenge. Getting the window to open.

I'm just glad no one could see me because I used every combination of pushing, pulling, tapping, nudging and anything else I could think of to try and get that stupid thing to open.

Let me just sum it up by saying that I probably used each of the seven basic ballet movements at least once before I was able to convince the window to give a fraction of an inch.

Once it had given me that much, there was no stopping me.

With a blast of effort that would make Hercules proud, I forced the window open.

I took in a deep breath of fresh, albeit searing hot, air.

Then I turned and surveyed the work that I would need to do.

Dust. I would need to go over every inch of the room and thoroughly wash it.

Not just wipe down but a full, hot soap and water, wash.

Every surface, every item, every corner... nooks and crannies too.

I looked around the room and tried to decide if it was worth all the work.

I had almost talked myself out of it. (I can be a bit lazy at times) When I realized that if I didn't take this room, I'd have to choose one of the others.

None of them even remotely felt like a home. They were as impersonal as motel rooms.

This room had character and a history of its own.

With that decided, I went downstairs to dig through cabinets and the mudroom for the supplies I would need to do a thorough cleaning job.

Don't look at me that way. I know how to clean... (just don't tell my mom, she thinks I'm helpless).

* * * * *

I lugged two buckets of hot water upstairs. One with soap and the other with clean water.

Then I brought up a broom, some cleaning rags and a couple brushes to help me get into little grooves and things.

Finally I started to clean.

It was like each new thing I cleaned revealed another treasure.

The pictures on the walls were of places I've never been, but somehow each of the scenes was so peaceful and held such warmth that I fell in love with each one.

When I looked at the pictures, I got the same feeling that I do when I think about home.

I'm sure the wallpaper was very colorful when it was new, but the colors had faded to the point that the pattern seemed to be made up of shades of gray.

I don't know why exactly, but I find that soothing and wouldn't want to change it.

My next big surprise was when I opened the dresser at the foot of the bed.

There were still clothes in there.

I didn't really mess with them too much because... I don't know, it just felt like I was messing with someone's personal things.

I went through all the dresser drawers and made sure there weren't any rats or spiders or anything in there and then I just kind of refolded the clothes and put them neatly away.

The toys on the dresser turned out to be toy soldiers. I used the smallest brush and cleaned them very carefully.

Someone had taken the time to carve each one of the soldiers by hand.

I don't know about antiques and stuff, but something as old and beautiful as the soldiers must be worth a bundle.

Not that I'd ever sell them... I mean, they're not mine.

* * * * *

Okay, this is really freaking me out.

Well, let me start at the beginning.

I was cleaning up the room, trying to get it ready to move into.

There was all kinds of really cool stuff in here and I was really getting into it.

Then I decided to start cleaning the desk...

I dusted off the top and cleaned it the best I could with a dry rag before I started cleaning each thing as I took it off.

I dusted the book, the one that was open on the desk. Well I sat it on the bed while I was wiping down something that I think was used to hold ink when the book just kind of popped open.

I mean, it was there on the bed. Closed, then all by itself it opened.

I guess the smart thing to do when something like that happens is to run out of the room screaming your head off and refuse to go back into the room... ever.

Me, I'm not smart. Well, not when it comes to common sense stuff like that.

I looked at the book and read the page.

I guess I wasn't really paying attention when I dusted it, because I didn't even notice that this wasn't a printed book. It was like a notebook.

The writing on the page was handwriting.

Okay, I'll just tell you what it said, then maybe you'll understand.

**They came again last night, just like every night
this week.**

**They frighten me, they tell me secret things that no
one knows.**

**Tonight when they come, they're going to ask me
to leave with them,**

**They say that they will only ask this once, and
never again,**

**I'm afraid of the unknown, but I will make my
choice with my heart,**

**I may find peace or pain in the unknown, but here
I find only loneliness,**

**I'm afraid of what I don't understand, and yet, I
can't find a reason to want to stay.**

Enoch

Chapter 2: Shifting Shadows

I sat there in stunned silence, not really thinking, but trying on some level to absorb what I had just read.

Finally I snapped out of it and looked around the room again, as if seeing it for the first time.

Did I really want to do this?

I mean, I'm not into all that mystical stuff. Ghosts and vampires and all that stuff was just made up... right?

But, what if...

I mean, if it was just some junk that someone made up, then how did the stories last for centuries? And how did people all over the world have the same type of stories in their own folklore?

Decision time.

Stay or go. It was just that simple.

I could either stay and deal with this... whatever it is or walk out the door and lock it behind me and try to forget that I ever opened it.

I can't say I really had any 'reasons' for my decision, but somewhere inside me I knew that I'd already decided.

Good or bad, scary or not, this was going to be my room... my home.

I don't know if maybe there was something in the dust that effected my brain or if maybe with all the recent changes in my life I needed to believe in something... for whatever reason, I turned in the desk chair and began to speak.

"Enoch? I'm sorry if my being here is upsetting you. I promise that I'm not trying to take your room away from you. But I really like it here and I'd like to be your roommate if you'd let me." I said quietly.

A sound caught my attention and I turned to see the drapes lazily flopping by the open window.

I smiled to myself at my silliness, then said, "Besides, you've let it get a little dusty in here. It looks like you could use some help taking care of the place."

After a look around the room, I decided to move on to my next monumental task.

"I hope you don't have some kind of sentimental attachment to this mattress, because it's so dirty that I could grow radishes in it. I don't know of any way that I can clean it, so I'm going to swap it with a mattress from another room." I said cautiously.

I don't know what I was expecting, maybe a slamming door or a ghostly visage screaming, "Noooooooooo!" But what I got was silence.

After another long silent moment waiting for some kind of omen or something, I finally said, "Thanks Enoch."

I wrestled the dirty, heavy mattress off the bedsprings and slowly dragged it toward the door.

"It would really help a lot if you could grab an end." I said as I struggled with the weight of the ancient mattress.

When I finally got the big awkward thing to the door, I said, "That's okay. I got it. Just watch after things while I'm gone."

* * * * *

When I stepped out into the hall, it was like the difference between day and night.

I didn't even realize it while I was in the room, but it's like... everything was different.

While I was in the room, I was in a safe place that was comfortable. As soon as I walked into the hall I was back in the bright, stark, cruel world where things didn't make sense and happened whether you wanted them to or not.

I quickly dragged the mattress down the hall to the next room past mine.

Suddenly it occurred to me that once I found my room I didn't even look at any of the others.

There was a whole wing of bedrooms up here that I hadn't even looked in.

So to correct that oversight, at least a little bit, I looked in the next room past mine.

I was happy to find that it had a bed that was just about the same size as mine.

When I pulled back the bedspread that was covering it, I was relieved to see that it was a mattress from this century.

I don't know what they put in mattresses a hundred or so years ago or however old this thing is, but whatever it was sure was heavy.

I swapped out the mattresses as quickly as I could and was almost running as I dragged the new mattress to my room.

Being away from my safe place was really bothering me.

* * * * *

"I hope you didn't miss me too much." I said with a smile as I pulled the mattress over to the bare bedsprings.

"Once we get everything set up in the house, I'm going to check into getting some boxed springs for this bed. They're a lot quieter." I said conversationally as I worked the new mattress into position.

The quiet in the room seemed heavier and I stopped to look around.

"Okay. I'll give this a try for a while and see if I get used to it. Don't worry, I don't want to change your room too much." I said, feeling a little concern at the different mood.

"Um, I don't know how you're going to like this, but I'm going to need a place to keep my clothes." I said hesitantly.

"From the amount of stuff I saw in the dresser, I could just move your stuff a little and make room for my stuff. I don't have that much." I said in a quieter voice.

The silence seemed even more pronounced and I had the feeling that my ghostly presence was not happy.

I took a seat on the bed and looked over at the full length oval mirror in the corner and said, "I'm sorry if I'm being a pest. But I really do want to be your roommate. If you'll just put up with me making a few little changes so I can have my stuff in here too, I think it's going to be great..."

The movement of the drapes flapping in the breeze from the evaporative cooler drew my eyes for a moment.

When I looked back at the mirror, something seemed to be different. A shadow, the dust on the glass... I don't know. Something just seemed to have changed.

"Enoch, I'm really sorry. Please give me a chance." I said, hoping that if there was a spirit present, that he could tell that I really meant it.

"By the way, I'm Mark. I guess I should have told you that first." I said as I looked around.

A faint 'click' caught my attention and I turned to see where it came from.

There was a large cabinet with two doors that I hadn't opened yet. As I watched, one of the doors opened very slowly as it made a low, creaking sound.

The hairs stood up on my neck as a shiver ran all the way up my spine.

I had stopped breathing as I watched the door finally stop moving when it was about an inch opened.

I don't know how long I sat there looking at that cabinet. But I finally decided that Enoch was giving me a message. Whatever was inside the cabinet was probably his answer of whether he wanted me to be his roommate or not.

I swear to God. If there's a body in there I'm gonna freak.

Slowly I got up off the bed and walked toward the cabinet.

As I raised my hand to open the door I noticed that my hand was shaking.

I took in a deep breath to brace myself for what I was about to do and opened the door.

* * * * *

There were clothes hanging in the cabinet.

I opened the other door to find that there were drawers.

After a moment of just staring at the clothes hanging before me, I turned away and looked around the room in confusion.

No closet.

There was no closet in this room.

After another long silent moment just staring off into space, I came back to myself and realized what it might mean.

"Thanks Enoch. I'll really try not to mess with your stuff too much." I said into the air.

All of a sudden one of the pieces of clothes, a dark suit jacket, fell off it's hanger and into the bottom of the cabinet.

I think I jumped about a foot in the air and might have even screamed a little.

One more scare like that and I'll have to go wipe.

After a moment to get my breathing under control, I reached down to pick up the jacket and noticed the shape that it held.

"Oh, I see what you mean. You've got some serious hanger wings here." I said, then looked at the jacket more closely.

"I hope you don't mind, but... this looks like it's about my size." I said, then looked around to make sure I wasn't missing some big glaring sign telling me not to try it on.

After another second of looking around, I hesitantly put my arm in the sleeve of the jacket.

I continued to watch as I pulled the jacket on and settled it into place.

"Wow. It fits perfectly." I said with a smile as I started to button it up.

One of the buttons came off in my hand and I froze.

"Sorry about that. I'll get it fixed. I don't know how you clean clothes that are this old, but I'm pretty sure if I threw this in the washer I'd just have a pile of rags left when it's done." I said as I carefully unbuttoned the jacket and took it off.

"But, since we're the same size, we could share clothes if you want. I mean, your stuff will all need to be washed and some of it won't be any good anymore. But, well, I don't know if you need clothes, but if you do, you'll be welcomed to share mine." I said quickly.

There wasn't any sound or movement in the room to tell me that he liked the idea, but somehow I got the feeling that he did.

I thought for a moment, then said, "How about I get your stuff together and put it into the next room until it's time to do laundry. I'll go ahead and move my stuff in now and when yours is washed, I'll put it all together."

After a moment, I nodded as if he had agreed with me, then got to work.

* * * * *

"I'm back!" I said with a smile as I carried my backpack into the room and actually felt welcomed as I made my way to the bed.

Clearing out Enoch's clothes hadn't taken too long, then I got back to the business of cleaning the room to make it livable.

I opened the top of my backpack and pulled out my laptop computer.

When I looked at the wall by the desk, I noticed that there wasn't an outlet.

As I looked around the walls of the room, I soon discovered that there were 'no' outlets.

"You don't have electricity?" I asked in a reluctant voice.

I hesitantly looked up at the ceiling to see that there was no light fixture.

The lamp on the desk was an oil lamp and the light fixtures on the walls appeared to be gas.

I thought for a moment, then said, "I'll be right back. I just have to check on something."

I carried my laptop and the charger cord with me into the study and looked around the desk.

"Cool." I said with relief as I found an outlet beside the desk.

I plugged in the laptop and left it to charge, then went back to my room.

* * * * *

"No problem. I'll just leave the laptop in there to charge and bring it in here when I need to use it..." I trailed off as I thought of something.

"Don't worry about it Enoch. When it's charged up, I'll bring it in here and you'll see what it is and what I can do with it." I said as I somehow felt his confusion.

"Later, I promise. Right now I need to figure out how I'm going to be able to see in here after dark... it does get dark here doesn't it?" I finished uncertainly.

"Sorry. I'm new here and it's just so different..." I trailed off as I looked at the oil lamp on the desk and tried to figure out how the thing worked.

The bottom of it was like a jug made out of colored glass and I could see that it was empty.

"I saw some lamp oil in the mud room. I'll be right back." I said as I hurried out the door.

* * * * *

I came back into the room with a bottle of lamp oil and a box of wooden matches.

"I hope that these wick things don't spoil or rot or anything because I don't know where I'd find one of them." I said as I unscrewed the little decorative cap on the side of the oil lamp, then began to slowly pour the oil.

"This would be a lot easier if you could help me. I've never done this before." I said intently as I held the bottle of lamp oil steady, being careful not to pour it too quickly.

After a moment of silence, I stopped pouring and looked toward the clothes cabinet.

I thought for a moment, then said, "I'm sorry. I know you can't help it. I was just saying that it would be nice."

After a pause, I went back to pouring the oil into the lamp.

"You'll slam a door or something if I'm about to do something that's going to burn my face off won't you?" I asked as I put the bottle of lamp oil aside and put the cap on it.

I screwed the decorative cap on the side of the oil lamp, then looked over my shoulder and said, "You're taking an awfully long time to think about it."

I smiled and chuckled to myself, as I adjusted the wick down a little, then back up to try and get it wet.

I fiddled with the little lever on the side of the lamp which raised the glass chimney up so I could get to the wick with the match.

"Cool." I said with a smile, then reached for the matches.

"Remember, I've never done this before so it's your job to protect me. If I'm about to do something stupid, you give me a sign or something to let me know. Got it?" I said seriously.

I waited for a second, then heard the door of the clothes cabinet creak a little.

"Good. Alright. Then I'm going to try to light this thing." I said, then struck the match on the side of the box.

The match flared to life in a burst, then settled into a timid flame.

I carefully moved the match under the glass chimney and touched it to the wick.

It didn't seem to catch at first, but after a few seconds, the edge of the wick that was closest to me started to flicker and spit.

"I guess that this will prove that I am a wussy city kid if I can't even light an oil lamp." I said in concentration as I watched the tiny flame struggle to catch on.

The flame finally started to spread across the wick and I quickly pulled the match back so I could put it out before it burnt my fingers.

I blew out the flame of the match and dropped it into a little metal cup by the side of the lamp. Next I moved the glass shade down over the wick and the flame grew brighter.

After a moment of adjusting the wick to a comfortable level of flame, I looked back around the room and said, "Well, now I have a bed. I have light and I have a place to put my things. I can't think of anything else that I'll need for me to be able to stay here. I just have to finish up the cleaning and find some sheets and stuff, then get my things out of the car."

I looked away from the lamp and around the room. I settled my gaze on the full length mirror and said, "I'll be a good roommate. I promise. If you'll just let me know if you need me to do something, I promise that I'll try to do it."

I concentrated, trying to imagine what needs a ghost might have. Finally I said in a quieter voice, "That's okay. I'm going to be around for a while, you can tell me whenever you're ready."

I smiled with contentment, then cupped my hand around the top of the glass chimney of the oil lamp and gently blew out the flame.

* * * * *

"I think I'm done." I said as I stopped at the doorway and put the mop into the bucket.

"It shouldn't take very long for the floor to dry as hot as it is." I said with accomplishment.

"I think I'll go down and get my suitcase out of the car then get a shower. It appears that sweat plus dust equals mud." I said as I looked down at my filthy arms.

I looked around the room and smiled, then said, "Your room is really nice. I hope you like it all cleaned up like this."

I stood for a minute, just soaking in the peaceful feeling, then reluctantly squatted down and picked up the mop bucket.

"I won't be gone too long. Just relax for a while, you've had a hard day too." I said as I turned to leave.

* * * * *

I stepped out the front door of the house and was once again overwhelmed by the heat.

Shit! Grandpa was right! It got hotter!

I wonder if you're supposed to wear an oxygen mask or radiation suit or something when you go outside here. I mean, it just feels like you should have something like that.

By the time I got my big suitcase out of the car, I was dripping wet with sweat.

The corner of a Doritos bag caught my eye and I grabbed the bag of snacks it was in before closing the car door.

By the time I got back up on the porch, I felt like I'd run a hundred miles.

As I walked into the house, I was so focused on the things I needed to do that I almost forgot to stop and cool off in front of the cool air blower.

I stood there with my suitcase at my side and the plastic shopping bag with the Doritos in it dangling from one finger as I felt the cool, moist air wash over me.

{I almost missed it.} I thought to myself with relief.

{At least after walking through the fire, there's a payoff.}

A series of things seemed to fall into order in my head, and I began to speculate if maybe after the fire of the past six months with mom and dad's divorce, that being here was a payoff. If I'll just stop and enjoy it.

It took a few minutes, but I finally cooled down enough that I could get back to my room.

* * * * *

"Sorry. That took longer than I thought it would." I said as I carried my suitcase into the bedroom.

"Back in Michigan I could have walked out to the car to grab something and it would have only taken a minute. This place is huge, the rooms are bigger, the ceilings are higher and the stairs seem to go on forever. Then when you get outside..." I trailed off, completely at a loss how to describe the West Texas desert.

The sound of a tap drew my attention and I saw Enoch's notebook on the desk where I had left it, except now it was open.

I sat my suitcase on the bed, then took a seat at the desk to try and see what Enoch wanted me to read.

After weeks of enduring the hardships of traveling to join my family in their new home, I have arrived in this place to find that I was told lies.

The ranch that my father described with pride in his letters was nothing more than a shanty in the middle of a wasteland. No fruit or vegetable could find purchase in this barren soil. No livestock could thrive and bear healthy young in this searing heat.

As a final insult, I arrived three days too late to be at the bedside of my mother who had fallen ill after being bitten by a venomous spider. Rather than being welcomed by her loving embrace, I was forced to stand in searing hot wind and stare at her crude dusty grave.

I have no money to arrange transport so I may return to live with my Aunt in Boston. My eldest brother has abandoned the family and moved

further West to seek his own fortune. My father has sought to find the answers to his life's problems in the bottom of a whiskey bottle. Through his alcoholic haze, he sees this place as being paradise.

I think that I shall not survive this experience. This place killed my mother's body, my father's mind and my brother's morality.

The only question left to be answered is what diabolical way is this place going to destroy me. May God have mercy on me and allow my end to be swift. I do not have the willpower to endure an existence in this hellish wasteland.

**Enoch Miller
July 10th, 1897**

I sat and stared at the page for a few minutes in silence, then finally said, "Wow. That sucks."

I reached up to turn the page, but stopped in mid motion.

"Thanks for telling me Enoch. From the look of it, you've got a lot of your personal thoughts and feelings in this book so I'm not going to read more unless you want me to." I said as I closed the book.

"I don't know how things were back in the 1890's, but if you were here with me now, I'd want to give you a hug to let you know how sorry I am for everything you went through." I said quietly.

I turned as I sensed movement close to me, even though nothing had moved.

I slowly stood and faced where I thought he might be and held my arms out to him.

"I know this isn't a real hug, but maybe it will help a little." I said, then brought my arms up, mimicking the action of giving a hug.

"It's going to be better now. You've got someone here to keep you company. You don't have to face everything alone." I whispered as I carefully held the pose.

After another moment of the pseudo-hug, I let my arms drop to my sides and said, "If you can find a way to let me know when you need a hug, I'll always have one for you."

I felt an odd sensation that I couldn't identify, but it was quickly followed by a blush in my cheeks.

"Thanks Enoch. I'm not sure what you just did, but whatever it was, I liked it." I said softly.

I stood there a moment longer, then noticed my suitcase still laying on the bed.

"I'm just going to grab the stuff I need for a shower. I won't be gone long." I said as I started looking through my suitcase for some shorts and a T-shirt to change into.

"I'll be back before you know it." I said hesitantly, then walked out of the room with my clothes in hand.

* * * * *

Even though I hadn't been in all the rooms yet, finding the bathroom was easy.

It was the room at the end of the hall and the door was standing open.

I walked in and took inventory to see that I had soap, shampoo and towels.

Once I was assured that I had everything I needed, I started to get undressed.

I pulled my T-shirt over my head and got a strange sensation, like the one I had in my bedroom.

"Enoch?" I asked as I looked around.

I couldn't feel it as strongly as before, but I was more than fifty percent sure that he was in the bathroom with me.

"It's okay Enoch. I don't mind." I said as I tried to get a sense of where he might be in the room.

Finally I turned to face the door and was almost certain that that's where he was.

"I don't know if it's because you've been alone for a long time, or if you, um... just want to see me... you know... naked. But either way, I'm okay with it." I said gently, then sat down on the edge of the large bath tub to undo my shoes.

"In fact, it's too bad I can't see you too... because it would be kinda cool if we could, you know, shower together." I said shyly as I kept my focus on taking off my shoes and socks.

I looked around the room again, then focused on the same place, just a foot or two in front of the door as I said, "Here it goes."

I unfastened my jeans and pulled down the zipper as I watched the spot for any reaction.

He seemed to be in the same place and I could sense him more strongly now.

I hooked my thumbs in the waistband of my briefs, then in one move, pulled my pants and underwear down together.

I stepped out of my pants and kicked them away, then stood with my arms outstretched.

"I hope I'm not going crazy and imagining all this because I think I like you." I said, then started to slowly turn so he could get a good look.

As I faced the door again, I felt his presence get closer, then I could feel that strange sensation that I felt earlier in the bedroom.

It was like a pulling in my stomach, just behind my navel.

"Thank you." I whispered as I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sensation of this insubstantial being somehow touching me.

I stood like that for a long minute, just relaxing in a mix of warm and cool sensations spreading over every part of my body as goosebumps started to raise on my arms.

"I just wish I could do something like that for you." I whispered while keeping my eyes closed.

The sensation slowly faded and I was alone, standing naked in the bathroom.

A feeling of concern came over me as I wondered if I might have said something wrong.

I looked around one more time to be sure that I was alone, then went about the business of getting showered.

The whole time I was showering, I was thinking about Enoch and wondering if he was okay.

* * * * *

I walked into the bedroom, feeling clean and refreshed.

After a moment to put my dirty clothes in the nylon bag that I had for just that purpose, I looked around the room to verify that Enoch was there.

"I was worried when you left, I'm glad you're here." I said as I started unpacking my clothes and putting them away.

I could feel something like apprehension or anxiety from Enoch and stopped what I was doing to try and find out what was wrong.

"It's okay. I'm sorry if what happened in the bathroom freaked you out a little. But it's really fine, I liked it and I hope that you did too." I said softly as I walked to stand in front of the mirror.

The feeling of apprehension seemed to change to one of fear and I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

"Oh Enoch. I wish I could hold you and make all the scary feelings go away." I said as I looked at the place where I imagined his face to be.

I slowly raised my hand and held it where I thought his face should be.

After a moment of waiting, I felt a tingly sensation, like he was making contact with the palm of my hand.

"I need to tell you something." I said quietly.

I felt the tingly sensation stop abruptly.

"I thought I hated this place when I arrived. I thought it was hell on Earth. But if we can be together like this... I think it's going to be okay." I said as I stared into the open space before me.

The tingling sensation started in my palm again, then suddenly changed so it was covering the entire front of my body.

I carefully brought my hands up and held them before me until I could barely feel the tingle in my palms.

"As long as we can be like this for each other, it's going to be fine." I said as I rubbed what I imagined to be his back.

I felt a tingle wash across my lips for an instant.

I smiled slightly as I waited to see if he would do it again.

He didn't, but I could feel him all across my chest and in my arms.

"Enoch, the world is outside this room and it's pretty much the same cruel place that you remember. But in here, we're home." I said softly.

I stood like that for a few more minutes until my stomach growling interrupted the moment.

I smiled as I said, "Well, us people of the living variety need to eat. I've got some food downstairs. Give me a few minutes and I'll go get something and bring it up here. I know you can't share it with me, but just being here with you will make it kind of like having a picnic."

I felt the tingle wash across my lips again briefly, then I could feel all the tingles begin to subside.

I lowered my arms and watched the nothingness before me.

"I'll be back in just a few minutes." I said, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

While I was eating my meal in my room, I noticed that it was starting to get dark outside.

I took a minute to light the oil lamp on the desk, then went back to eating.

If tomorrow was going to be anywhere near as hot as today, then I should get our crap out of the car while it's dark.

When I had finished my meal, I quietly said, "I have to get the rest of our stuff out of the car. It's been out there all day."

I had expected to feel something like longing or disappointment like the other times I had left the room, but this time I felt happiness.

I thought about what that might mean for a second, then broke into a smile as I said, "Yeah, that means I'm staying."

I felt the presence shift from the bed beside me to stand in front of me.

I slowly stood and waited.

I felt a brief tingle on my lips, then he seemed to move away.

I smiled as I said, "Yeah. I'll hurry back."

* * * * *

I pretty much stacked everything in the living room. I figured that mom would want to go through it and put the stuff away herself so she'd know where it was. I took my box of junk from my bedroom back in Michigan and carried it upstairs.

"Honey, I'm home." I said with a smile as I walked into the room.

I sensed confusion from the chair at the desk as I walked by.

"I guess you never got to watch 'I Love Lucy'. Well, don't worry about it." I said as I started pulling out my things and putting them away.

I heard a click and turned to see what was going on.

"Oh, that's my flute case. I guess since you haven't seen 'I Love Lucy' that probably means you haven't seen 'American Pie' either." I said as I picked up the case.

"I'll tell you all about it sometime, but for now, let's just say that every flute player in the world has had people making fun of them because of that movie." I said as I pulled the sections of my flute out and fit them together.

A feeling of expectation nearly vibrated from beside me.

"Sure. I'd love to play for you." I said as I finished, then worked all the valves to make sure nothing was sticking.

First I played 'Time In A Bottle' because I've always liked that song and it's become sort of my 'warm up' piece.

After that I decided to play my masterpiece.

I can read sheet music, but I did this arrangement all by myself. I took one of my all-time favorite songs and adapted it for the flute.

"Sit down Enoch. This is for you." I said, then waited until I sensed that he had taken a seat on the bed.

I started to play the slow, lilting melody of Backstreet Boys '10,000 Promises'.

I kept my gaze on where I knew he was sitting as I let myself get lost in the song.

The light from the oil lamp was causing the shadows to shift and dance on the walls.

When I was finally finished, I couldn't tell what emotions I was sensing.

I sat my flute carefully on the bed and waited as I tried to sort through his feelings.

Finally I felt his presence stand before me and I felt a tingling on my arms.

I didn't understand what he wanted me to do, so I kept my arms at my sides and waited.

All of a sudden I felt it, not just the tingling sensation on my lips, but what I imagine a real kiss feels like.

It was solid and warm and firm and felt like it was trying to devour me.

By pure force of will I kept my arms at my sides and let Enoch do what he wanted, responding to his kisses only with my mouth.

It's funny how your perception of time can be thrown off by a certain thing.

Time seems to stop while you're waiting for water to boil.

But in a circumstance like this, time just seemed to have taken a vacation.

We might have been like that for thirty seconds or thirty minutes. I was so lost in the pure sensation that everything else in the world disappeared for me and all that existed for me was that kiss.

When the kiss ended, I stood there and stared into the empty space where he should have been standing.

"I wish I could see your eyes." I said in a whisper.

I felt a gentle peace radiating from him that made me smile.

"I need to get this stuff put away so I can go to bed." I said as I glanced at the box on the bed.

His mood and presence didn't waver.

"Will you be able to go to bed with me?" I asked hopefully.

The joy that radiated out from him was like fireworks lighting the night sky.

I broke into a full smile at the reaction, then picked up the box and sat it by the foot of the bed.

"I can go through that stuff in the morning." I said as I quickly broke down my flute and put it back in its case.

As soon as I had the bed cleared off, I felt his presence move onto the bed and over by the wall.

"Good. Now I won't have to worry about trying to get out of bed in the morning without waking you." I said as I made sure that there was nothing else laying around that needed to be dealt with before I went to sleep.

Finally I walked over to the oil lamp on the desk and cupped my hand around the top of the glass chimney, then gently blew out the flame.

"Sweet dreams." I whispered as I climbed into the bed.

* * * * *

I opened my eyes and looked around at the complete blackness.

I remembered laying down in bed and getting comfortable. I closed my eyes and then...

I was here, standing up, wearing the clothes that I'd arrived in.

I looked down at my hands and could see myself clearly, but everything around me was dark. There was no light anywhere. It was like *I* was the light.

"Mark." A low voice said from behind me, startling me out of my confused thoughts.

I hesitantly turned, then smiled with relief as I said, "Enoch."

Chapter 3: To Live in Dreams

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Enoch said formally.

"Yeah. It's nice to meet you too. And you've got the coolest accent." I said with a smile. I don't even know how to describe it except to say that he sounded 'proper'.

"Thank you. I enjoy the sound of your accent as well." Enoch said and bowed to me in a very gentlemanly manner.

"Wow. You have the greenest eyes I've ever seen, they're like... jade." I said in thought, trying to think of another way to describe the unusual creamy green color of his eyes.

"Some have said that they are a sign of evil. A mark of the devil within me." Enoch said quietly.

"Yeah, people like that usually have more devil in them than anyone they point their fingers at." I said without thinking.

Enoch's eyes went wide at the statement, then he broke into a grin. Oh my God! It was the most perfect smile ever created.

I was so captivated by his chestnut brown hair, green eyes and perfect smile that I was just standing there, staring at him, until he finally spoke.

"I must warn you, what we are doing causes fatigue. We must be brief." Enoch said as he became serious.

I shook myself out of my stupor, then asked, "What are we doing?"

"We are not really here. You are in bed dreaming this right now." Enoch said seriously.

"Where are you?" I asked cautiously.

"In the bed, beside you." He said with a smile.

"Sounds good so far." I said as my smile joined his.

"My creating this dream place for us and you being here will make us both tired. Time does not move the same when we do this so we must be brief." Enoch said firmly.

"Okay. Be quick. Got it." I said seriously.

"This is how I see the bedroom." Enoch said as he gestured to the blackness around him.

"I don't see anything." I said carefully.

"Some things, the beloved things, retain a glow. To see other things I must use my own illumination." Enoch said as he walked across the room and seemed to look for something.

"Here. Look at this." He said and pointed to something before him.

I walked to his side and looked at what he wanted me to see.

"It's one of your soldiers." I said as I looked at it carefully.

"Can you see the others?" He asked as he took a step away.

Without his light to distract me I could see the other soldiers, each with its own faint light.

"That's really cool. You said that beloved things have their own light, so I'm guessing that you carved these and that's why they glow like this?" I said curiously.

"No. They were a gift that was made just for me. They are perhaps my most cherished possessions." He said softly.

"They're really beautiful. I was extra careful while I was cleaning them." I said as I watched his eyes carefully to see if I'd upset him by touching his things.

He smiled and said, "I was watching you. At first I was afraid that you were going to pack them away and take them from me, but then you put them back... even in the proper order."

"I tried to be careful. They're really beautiful." I said quietly.

"Most people see only toys." He said as he looked at the soldiers again.

I tried to pick up one of the soldiers but my hand just passed through.

"It takes much practice and effort to move a thing in your world. I have mastered the skill to some degree over time but it is still difficult."

Feeling that there needed to be a change in subject, I quietly said, "In that first thing I read in your book you said something about others. Are there other people here?"

"No. They left many years ago... at least I think it has been years. Without day or night, heat or cold, there isn't a way to mark the passage of time in this place." He said distantly.

"So you can't see sunlight?" I asked in wonder.

"No. Only the light of the spirit can be seen in this place... well in the place where I really am. This is just a dream." He corrected quietly.

"What happened to the others? Where did they go?" I asked, feeling that he might be purposely evading the question.

"They faded." He whispered.

"Faded? Like, stopped being?" I asked with concern.

"I assume so. I do not know where you go when you fade or enter the holy light. I only know that I am not welcomed in either place." Enoch said with regret.

"What do you mean?" I asked carefully.

"I have encountered the holy light several times. When it comes to retrieve a departed soul I have tried to enter, but when it left, I was still here." Enoch said in a quivering voice.

"Come here." I said and opened my arms to him.

"We haven't much time." He said in warning.

"We have time for this." I said, then pulled him into a firm hug.

After a long minute of hugging, I hesitantly asked, "Are you going to fade someday?"

"No. The spirits of the dead will either ascend with the light or fade into nothingness. But I am not dead. I traveled to this place incarnate." Enoch said as he pulled back to look in my eyes.

"In what?" I asked slowly.

"In the flesh. That means that my body traveled to this spiritual realm." Enoch said quietly.

"I remember you said that those 'others' were telling you secrets and stuff, trying to talk you into coming here. What was that all about?" I asked cautiously.

Enoch held me tighter as he quietly said, "They told me lies. They believed that if I walked through the crack between the worlds, they would be able to overpower me and take my body back through the doorway. They intended to leave my spirit here to fade away."

"So what happened? Why didn't it work?" I asked cautiously.

"They couldn't effect my physical body in this... that spiritual place. They had no substance, therefore they could not compel me to do anything." Enoch said seriously.

"Then why are you stuck?" I asked quietly.

"I cannot be sure. I was able to enter because I was pushing and they were pulling from the other side. When I tried to return, my body could not reenter the passage. Soon after that, the crack between the worlds closed." He said quietly.

"Closed, like forever?" I asked, afraid of the answer.

"No. Not forever. It opens on occasion, but there is no point. I cannot pass through." He said sadly.

"What if you had someone on this side pulling?" I asked quietly.

He stopped, and seemed to be thinking about it.

"You said that it worked that way before. You were pushing and they were pulling. When it opens again, I could pull you through." I said with a smile.

"We could but try. There would be no harm if it did not work." Enoch said distantly.

"How long do you think it will be before it opens?" I asked with concern.

"There is no way to know when it will open, but when it does, it will take time for it to open fully. We will have time to prepare." Enoch said in a considering voice.

"I'm confused about something. In your letter you said that you arrived to find a... um, what did you call it? A shanty in this wasteland? This doesn't look like a shanty to me." I said in confusion.

"Oh. This isn't my father's property. When my father passed away from excessive drink, Marshall James offered to buy my fathers land and took me into his home. He was very kind to me." Enoch said quietly.

"I don't know who Marshall James was but my grandfather's last name is James." I said quickly.

"We must end this dream. Otherwise you will not be rested in the morning." Enoch said with regret.

"Will you answer one more question for me?" I said quickly.

"If I can." Enoch said as he looked deeply into my eyes.

"When I first got here, I couldn't see you at all. I wasn't sure if you were really here. But then I could sort of feel where you were in the room." I said, not really knowing how to ask what I wanted to know.

"I'm not sure if you are learning to listen or if we are becoming accustomed to each other's presence. But I believe that the longer we are together, the better you will be able to sense my presence." He said quietly.

"Have you ever done that with someone else?" I asked curiously.

"Only with those who lured me to this place. We must end this now." He finished seriously.

"Would you mind if I kissed you?" I asked timidly.

He gave me another one of those full smiles, then said, "I can think of nothing that would please me more."

I smiled, then moved in to give him the most mind blowing kiss that I could manage.

I don't have a lot of experience at kissing, but I'm hoping that my enthusiasm made up for the difference.

When I pulled back from the kiss, I looked into his eyes to see a dreamy sense of wonder.

"In this time... what year is it now?" Enoch asked absently.

"2007." I said in a whisper.

His eyes went wide with shock.

"That's right. It's been one hundred and ten years since you arrived in Texas." I said as I pulled him into another hug.

"Now, in 2007, are two men allowed to..." Enoch trailed off, not knowing how to explain what he wanted to know.

"Show their love?" I asked gently.

He nodded hopefully.

"Not as much as I'd like, but I think most people are okay with it." I said quietly.

"If I don't stop this now, I may never want to stop." Enoch said with regret from my arms.

"I know what you mean. My life is sucking pretty bad right now. I love being here with you and I don't want to wake up and find out that this was

just a dream." I said as I held him close to me.

"But it is a dream. Our bodies are laying side by side. One in the physical world and the other in the spiritual world." Enoch said distantly.

"If I have to leave this dream, I want to do it while I'm kissing you." I said, then moved in for another kiss.

* * * * *

I opened my eyes slowly and looked over at the window where the morning light was sparkling in.

After a moment of just relaxing and enjoying the morning light, I turned in my bed and smiled as I faced the insubstantial presence beside me.

"Good morning Enoch." I whispered in my raspy morning voice.

I felt a wisp of a tingle cross my cheek as I imagined his hand caressing me in a tender gesture of caring.

"I can almost see you." I said as I noticed that his presence was more definite.

"I have to get up and get dressed. Will you give me a kiss to start the day?" I asked as I brought my hand to the side of his face.

Enoch's insubstantial presence moved and I turned my head slightly to make it easier for him.

I felt the tingle of contact between our lips, then I felt the sensation begin to change.

The kiss became definite and assertive as it became more and more real.

I focused all my thought and will into the kiss, somehow willing my own strength and concentration into Enoch so he could make the kiss as real as possible.

The silence of the big old house, the bright sunlight flooding the room and the sensations of Enoch's kissing were the most perfect sensations that I could imagine.

When the kiss had finally finished, I whispered, "When the crack between the worlds opens again, we're going to be together. I promise."

I felt the tingle of contact spread all down my side as Enoch settled in to rest his head on my shoulder and lay beside me.

"I lov..." I began to say, but then pulled it back.

Too soon. It's too soon for those words.

I brought up my arm and held it so I was holding Enoch in my best imitation of a loose hug.

"I wish I could stay here with you all day, but I have stuff that I have to do." I said with regret.

Enoch's presence moved, then I felt the gentle tingle of a kiss before he withdrew from beside me.

I reluctantly got up off the bed so I could dress and prepare for my day.

* * * * *

I walked into the kitchen and smiled at the scent of freshly cooked bacon in the air.

"Good morning sleepy head. Did you have a good sleep?" Mom asked as she poured a glass of orange juice.

"Yeah. I slept great." I said with a dreamy smile.

"So Mark, did you find a room that you like?" Grandpa asked, then took a sip from a cup of coffee.

"Yeah." I said, not wanting to get into detail just yet.

"Thanks for bringing the stuff in from the car. I woke up early so it's all put away." Mom said cheerfully, then sat a plate of eggs, bacon and toast in front of me.

"Sure, thanks. This looks good." I said with a smile.

I couldn't remember the last time she'd made me breakfast and it really did look good.

"I need to go shopping this morning, do you want to come with me?" Mom asked casually as she put a glass of orange juice by my plate.

"Yeah..." I said, then thought of something.

"Is there a dry cleaners anywhere near the store?" I asked before taking a large bite of eggs.

"If y'all are going to Wal*Mart there's a cleaners right across the street." Grandpa said in thought.

"What do you have that needs dry cleaning?" Mom asked as she took a seat at the table.

"I found some old clothes that are my size and thought I'd get them cleaned so I could wear them. That's okay isn't it?" I asked and turned my attention from my plate to mom to await her answer.

"All the rooms have been cleaned out for years. Did you go into the attic?" Grandpa asked curiously.

"No." I said shyly, then reluctantly continued, "I went into the locked room."

"That room's haunted. You can't stay in there." Grandpa said in a flustered voice.

"I really like the room and nothing bad's happened." I said imploringly.

"Mark, you've got to listen to me about this. No one can stay in there. Something evil haunts that room. Your grandmother went in there to try and clear the room out and something attacked her. I saw the bruises. You're in danger if you stay in there!" Grandpa said in an increasing voice.

"I slept in there last night and I didn't have any problem at all. Maybe whatever attacked grandma is gone." I said in an urging voice, hoping I could get grandpa to go along with me.

After a shake of his head, grandpa finally said, "If you see anything strange at all... Anything, I want you to call me and we'll move you to another part of the house." Grandpa said firmly.

"I got it grandpa. I'll let you know if there's any problem." I said with a small smile.

"So why do you want to dry clean the clothes?" Mom asked curiously.

"Because they're awesome. As soon as they're clean I want to start wearing them." I said with a smile at her.

"Why?" Mom asked hesitantly.

"Just wait till you see them. I think you'll like them too." I said, then turned my attention back to what was left of my food, trying to ignore mom's curious glare at me.

"So, are you two set up for the day?" Grandpa asked, breaking the intense mood.

Mom snapped out of it, then turned her attention to grandpa and said, "Yeah. Thanks for bringing the food this morning. It was nice to have a real breakfast."

"Yeah, thanks grandpa. Breakfast was great." I added. I really appreciated the wonderful meal.

"That's fine. Just make sure to save your appetite for lunch. Your grandma is going to want to make a big meal to welcome y'all home." Grandpa said with a smile at me.

"Okay. I'll remember." I said, then used my last little piece of toast to wipe up the egg yolk from my plate.

"We'll be there Dad. I've just got to go shopping and then I've got a few calls to make. We should have plenty of time." Mom said as she stood and took my empty plate away.

"Do you need to stop by our place and use the phone before you head into town?" Grandpa asked as he watched mom at the sink.

"No. I checked my cell phone this morning and I'm getting a decent signal. I can use it to get the phone turned on and the electric put in my name." Mom said as she quickly washed my plate, then rinsed it under the tap.

"Well, I'd best be going to tend to the animals so I'll be able to spend some time with y'all later." Grandpa said as he slowly stood.

"If you need any help taking care of the animals, I'm sure Mark wouldn't mind helping you." Mom said quickly.

{Thanks Mom.} I thought sarcastically, then turned to grandpa and said, "Yeah, but you'll have to show me what to do."

"We'll just have to see if anything's left to do by the time y'all get to the house." Grandpa said as he held the back of the chair that he had been sitting in.

"We should be there by noon." Mom said as she dried her hands on the dish towel.

"I'd better get started if I'm ever going to get finished. Oh, remember to close up the house tight when you leave. From the looks of it, we're likely to have a dust storm this afternoon." Grandpa said as he started to walk for the kitchen door.

I glanced at mom, then turned to grandpa and hesitantly asked, "Dust storm?"

"You'll just have to wait and see it for yourself. There's really no way to describe it." Mom said as she walked to my side.

"Mark. You're getting to see a different side of nature. Try to see the beauty, even though it's not what you're used to." Grandpa said seriously.

"I'll try grandpa." I said quietly.

* * * * *

"Are you ready to go?" Mom asked as she wiped down the kitchen table.

"I just need to get my dry cleaning." I said and hurried out of the room.

I went to the room beside mine and picked out about six or seven things that I wanted to get done first. I could do more the next time we went into town.

After folding everything neatly and making a nice little stack of it, I hurried into my room and looked around for Enoch.

I found his invisible presence still laying on the bed.

I sat the bundle of clothes on the desk, then smiled as I said, "It must be nice to be able to lay in bed all morning. In fact, I think I'd like to do that with you one of these days."

A feeling of delight came from the bed and I could tell that he liked the idea as much as I did.

"I just wanted to tell you that we're going into town to get some groceries and stuff. I'm taking some of your clothes to get them cleaned." I said quickly.

I felt curiosity coming from him and wasn't sure what he wanted to know.

Finally I responded, "We're going to come back here to put away the groceries and I'll see you for a little bit then, but we'll be going to lunch at grandpa's house after that so I'll be leaving again."

I felt a slight wave of sadness and longing coming from him when I said that.

"I know. I want to be here with you too. But I have to go meet my grandma. I promise that I'll be back as soon as I can." I said with regret at having to leave him at all.

Enoch stood before me and I could feel his presence more strongly than ever before. I could almost see him.

"MARK! Let's go!" Mom called from the foot of the stairs.

"One quick kiss, then I've got to go." I whispered, then moved in to give Enoch the best kiss that I could.

It was quick, but nice. I know he must have to concentrate a lot to make the kisses feel as 'real' as they do, but it's absolutely worth it.

"I'll be back soon." I said as soon as the kiss broke.

"MARK!" Mom screeched.

"Maybe I could stay here and you could go with her." I said reluctantly.

I could feel Enoch's humor as he walked beside me to the bedroom door.

"I'll hurry back." I said with regret at leaving him, then picked up the bundle of clothes from the desk and hurried out the door.

* * * * *

"So you opened the locked room?" Mom said in a low voice as she drove us away from the house.

"Yeah." I said, knowing I was about to get a 'Mom lecture'.

"You must have realized that it was locked for a reason. Why did you open it?" Mom asked in a leading tone. I could feel it, she was revving up, getting ready to let loose on me.

"I don't know. I guess I just wanted to see what was in there." I said quietly.

"I know with all the chaos of the past few months that you might feel sort of, adrift. I suppose it's natural to act out..." Mom started to say.

"But I'm not..." I interrupted.

"Shhh. Let me finish. Like I was saying, it's natural for you to want attention. But I'm trying to start a new life here and I really need your help. This isn't going to work if I have to worry about you getting into trouble every time I turn my back for a minute. I'm going to have to try to get a job and get us on our feet." Mom said in an imploring tone.

"I didn't do anything wrong. If I'd opened that door and found out that it was someone's bedroom I would have locked it back up and left it alone. But it was an old room that no one has been in for years. I didn't pick that room to get your attention. I didn't think you'd care one way or the other. You keep saying that you want me to be happy here. Well, I like my room. It makes me happy." I said, trying to keep the anger out of my voice.

"Fair enough. But for future reference, ask before you open anymore locked doors." Mom said seriously.

"So this isn't our home?" I asked in a challenging voice.

"How do you mean?" Mom asked curiously.

"If I'm not allowed to walk around the place and check it out then it's like I'm a guest in someone else's house. I guess I'm not allowed to put nail holes in the walls or paint either." I said seriously.

There was a moment of silence that concerned me.

"I don't know yet Mark." Mom said quietly.

My concern grew at her response.

"The future is too uncertain right now for me to be able to promise that we'll be staying here." Mom said in a reflective tone.

I felt a cold, numb shock wash over me, then hesitantly asked, "Where else would we go?"

"I really don't know yet. I've contacted quite a few people to let them know that I'm looking for a job. We might have to move to Dallas or Austin if I end up getting a job in one of those places." Mom said reluctantly.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" I asked as my mind raced.

"Because I'm doing my best to face each new thing as I come to it." Mom said quietly.

"Are we ever going to have a home again?" I asked in a lost tone.

"I just don't know. It may take a few years of apartment living before we can afford a place, and even then... some of these jobs may require me to move around a lot." Mom said as she gazed at the open road before her.

{By the time she gets us settled, I'll be old enough to go out on my own and make my own life.} I thought as I stared at the horizon.

* * * * *

The sound of mom's cell phone ringing broke the introspective silence that had fallen between us.

"Would you get that?" Mom asked in a distracted voice.

I reached into mom's purse and began to dig through the collection of crap that she carries everywhere with her to try to find her cell phone.

After a few seconds, I finally found it and quickly accepted the call then said, "Hello?"

"Hi Mark. Did you two get there alright?" I heard my Dad ask in a gentle voice.

"Yeah Dad. We got here around noon yesterday." I said with a smile.

"Good. How are you doing?" Dad asked and sounded genuinely concerned.

"I'm good. I'm still getting used to this place. It's kind of like being on another planet." I said honestly.

Dad chuckled, then said, "That's the way I felt the first time I visited. But once you get used to it you'll figure out that it's not really that different."

"We'll see. There's supposed to be something called a 'dust storm' today." I said frankly.

"Just stay inside and remember to carry a handkerchief with you." Dad said, and I could hear a fond smile in his voice.

"Okay. I'll do that." I said gently.

"Is your mom where I can talk to her?" Dad asked hesitantly.

"She's driving right now. You know how mom is about driving and talking on the cell phone." I said seriously.

"Yes, and that's very smart of her. Would you just tell her that everything is set up to transfer the money as soon as she has the accounts set up?" Dad asked in a professional voice.

"Sure, hang on." I said, then turned to mom and said, "Dad says that the money is ready to transfer as soon as the accounts are set up."

"Will you tell him that I'll be ready in about an hour? Oh, and ask him where I should call him back." Mom said in concentration.

I nodded and started to say, "Mom said..."

"I heard. Tell her to call my cell. I'm on call, so I may not be at the house when she's ready." Dad said seriously.

"He said that he's on call so call him on the cell." I said as I looked at mom.

"Okay. The bank I want is a block or two from the store so I'll drop you off and get right to it." Mom said in thought.

"Did you get that?" I asked into the phone.

"Got it. I'm going to let you go now. I have a few things to take care of before I move into my apartment." Dad said in a thoughtful tone.

"I'm glad I got to talk to you. It's really good to hear your voice." I said with a smile. I never really talked to Dad too much while we were all living in the same house, but for some reason it made me feel better to talk to him now.

"I'm glad too Mark. Remember that I'm just a phone call away if you ever need me for anything." Dad said, and it sounded like he was getting a little choked up.

"Okay. I'll remember." I said quietly, not quite sure how to deal with this emotional side of my father's personality.

"Who knows? Maybe you'll find yourself a nice cowboy down there and settle down." Dad said in a teasing voice.

"Wha... What?" I asked in a squeak.

In the year since I'd come out to my father during his 'The Birds and the Bees' talk with me, he'd never once brought up the subject of me being gay.

"You just have to promise me that if you find someone and it looks like it's getting serious that I get to meet him. Call me and I'll get plane tickets for both of you. Got it?" Dad asked, sounding choked up again.

"I... Um... Yeah, got it." I said in a voice of complete shock.

"I love you Mark. Don't ever forget that." Dad said quietly.

"I love you too Dad." I said in wonder at the surreal scene that I seemed to be playing out.

"Take good care of your mom. She's not as strong as she likes to act." Dad said in a concerned voice.

"I will. I promise." I said, still in a stupor.

"I love you. Goodbye." Dad said reluctantly.

"I love you too. Bye." I said absently, then hung up the phone.

* * * * *

"Are you alright?" Mom asked with concern from beside me.

"Yeah. Why?" I asked as I finally began to come out of my shock.

"You're crying." She said as she glanced at me.

"Oh, I, um... Yeah, I'm fine. Are we almost there?" I asked in a flustered voice.

"We're just a couple minutes away. I'll drop you off at the cleaners and you can walk across the street to the store if that's alright. I really need to get this stuff at the bank taken care of." Mom said in a voice of concentration.

"Yeah. That's fine." I said with distraction.

She pulled the car into the parking lot of a strip mall and stopped right in front of a dry cleaners.

"While you're in the store, look around for anything you might need for your room and you might want to pick up some light weight clothes and maybe some extra gym shorts for around the house." Mom said as she turned her full attention to me.

"Got it." I said as I put my hand on the door handle.

"Do you have some money with you in case you need a drink or something? I can't be sure how long this will take." Mom said as she looked at me with concern.

"Yeah. I'll be fine. Just let me get my dry cleaning out of the back seat so you can get started." I said and opened my car door.

I quickly pulled the bundle of clothes out of the back seat, then shut the car door with my knee.

I stepped back and watched as she drove away.

After a moment to get my emotions back under control, I turned to carry my bundle into the dry cleaners.

* * * * *

After my stop at the dry cleaners, I crossed the street and went to the Wal*Mart Supercenter.

You know how they say that everything is bigger in Texas. It's true.

The street that I crossed was like a highway. The parking lot was like it was for a mall and the store was nothing less than huge.

I went in and walked around the clothing department, picking out the things that I needed.

Once I had the things mom had mentioned, I grabbed a pack of red bandana handkerchiefs and started looking at some nice clothes to go with

what I had at the dry cleaner's.

"Mark Taylor, please meet your party at register one. Mark Taylor, please meet your party at register one." Sounded over the store's intercom.

I carried my armload of clothes toward the front of the store as I wondered why she didn't just come and get me.

By the time I got to the front of the store, I understood.

This place was so huge that she'd probably have to look for half an hour to find me.

"I'm here Mom." I said as I carried my stack of clothes to join her by the register.

Mom took the clothes from me then started to look at each thing with an appraising eye.

When she got to a button up white shirt, she stopped and looked at me curiously.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"Getting you into a button up shirt was like trying to bathe a cat. Now you're picking them out for yourself?" Mom said curiously.

"Maybe I'm growing up?" I said hesitantly.

"Well, at least you picked out some cool clothes too. I need to do the shopping, so if you want to look at movies or games while I'm getting our food, just be where I can find you." Mom said seriously as she put my stack of clothes in the child carrier part of the shopping basket.

"That's okay. Besides, you'll probably need two carts since we don't have much of anything in the house to start with." I said honestly.

Mom looked at me with surprise, then said, "You're not acting like yourself. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Growing up. Really. Just go with it." I said as I looked her in the eyes.

"I'm not going to complain if it means you're going to help me shop. Go on and grab another cart." She finished with a smile.

* * * * *

"I need to stop by the cleaner's again." I said as Mom started to drive us out of the parking lot.

"What for?" Mom asked curiously as she changed direction so we could go to the cleaner's.

"I just had them do a one hour job on one of the things so I could have it for today." I said reluctantly.

Mom seemed to be considering my answer as she pulled us into the strip mall parking lot.

* * * * *

After we'd been on the road for a few minutes, Mom hesitantly asked, "Mark, did your father say something to upset you?"

I snapped out of my thoughts of Enoch and quietly said, "Not really. He just said that if I meet a nice cowboy and it looks like it's getting serious that he wants to meet him."

"I'm sure he wasn't making fun of you. I know your father isn't the most expressive man around, but he tries really hard to be understanding." Mom said gently.

"No. I know he was serious. I guess it's just weird because... I guess I kind of felt like me being gay was part of what made you guys get divorced." I finished in nearly a mumble.

"Not even close." Mom said firmly.

I looked at Mom with question.

"We got divorced because we're two very different people who are growing in opposite directions. I still care about your father very much but I couldn't continue fighting to keep a marriage going all by myself." Mom said introspectively.

"I don't understand." I said hesitantly.

"It's been heading this way for a few years now. Your dad has been devoting more and more of his time to his job and I've been trying to keep the marriage going all by myself. One day I woke up and realized that there wasn't anything left to keep going." She said distantly.

"So dad wasn't staying away from the house so he wouldn't have to be around me?" I asked cautiously.

"No honey. He was staying out working. He isn't a bad man, but he isn't the loving, carefree man that I married either. He's very good at his job and helps a lot of people. I'm very proud of him for that." Mom said in thought.

"But why can't he just forget about all that stuff when he's off work and have a life?" I asked curiously.

"He did that until he was promoted to detective. Then the job became too big for him to leave at work. He's just not able to turn off what he's thinking and feeling when he goes home at the end of the day. He's not wired that way." Mom said with regret sounding in her voice.

"So his work is more important to him than we are?" I asked speculatively.

"No honey. His job is very important to him but there's more to it than that. I've been watching as your father has become more and more distant. You're growing up and you don't need me to be around as much as you used to. I have a college degree that I've never used and I think it's time that I started to make my own way in the world. I need to have something that's my own to care about and make a contribution." Mom said as her voice became more passionate.

{So she wants to get a job that she can get lost in, just like Dad.} I thought to myself as I looked off into the distance.

"I know it seems unfair to push all this on you, but it won't be very long before you're going to be off on your own with your own life." Mom said as she tried to justify her decision either to me or to herself.

Silence fell between us as I continued to think about what all this might mean for me and Enoch.

* * * * *

"Here it is." Mom said as she turned onto the dirt road.

Relief flooded over me at the sight of the road that led to Enoch and my home.

"Mark, things will settle down eventually and you'll be able to have a normal life again. I promise." Mom said seriously.

Normal? I wonder what that's going to be like. Is normal going to be me sitting around wondering if she's going to dump me like she did Dad when I get in the way of her 'new life'? Is normal going to be watching her make Dad's mistakes and become so lost in her work that she doesn't remember that I'm around? Maybe normal is me becoming as screwed up as them and becoming a workaholic zombie? Fuck normal! I NEED ENOCH!

"If you'll stack the things in the kitchen, I'll put them away." Mom said as she brought the car to a stop.

I nodded absently as I got out of the car, then pulled a load of Wal*Mart bags out of the back seat.

* * * * *

"Enoch. Oh God. I've missed you." I said as I hurried into the room.

I felt his concern ignite like a flare and realized that I should have tried to be a little more controlled.

I dropped my bags of clothes on the desk and carefully draped the dry cleaned waistcoat over the back of the desk chair. Then I walked to the side of the bed where I could sense that Enoch was standing.

"I need a hug right now. Worse than I've ever needed one in my life." I said as I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

I felt his hand tingling on my arm, but didn't know what he wanted me to do.

After a moment, he moved away from me and laid down on the bed.

Finally I understood and laid down beside him.

I felt the tingling sensation of his touch on my eyelids.

I smiled as I finally realized what he wanted me to do.

I closed my eyes and tried to relax into a dream state.

A moment later I found myself standing in the same darkness as the night before.

"What is wrong?" Enoch asked with concern as he approached.

"I... My mom. She's talking about moving us away from here." I said as I hugged him desperately.

There was a long moment of silence, then Enoch quietly asked, "Has she said when?"

"No. She doesn't know. But when she gets a job, she's going to move us so we can be close to her work... I'll have to leave." I said as I felt tears starting to fall down my cheeks.

"I... I don't want you to leave." Enoch said in a whisper.

I pulled back to look in his eyes and saw that he was also crying.

"I can't let it happen. I can't." I said, then pulled him back into the hug.

"Some things are outside our control." Enoch said with resignation as he held me tightly.

"And some things aren't. I've got to make sure that I can stay here with you. I've got to." I said, then pulled him into a deep firm kiss born more of desperation than passion.

After a long moment of kissing, I reluctantly pulled away to look him in the eyes.

"Remember that the passage of time is different here." Enoch said with regret.

"I know. I have to go to grandpa's house for lunch. But I'll be back just as soon as I can. I promise." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

"I will be waiting." Enoch said in a loving whisper.

I smiled, then moved in to give him another kiss.

I felt the dream sensation leave me and suddenly I was in my bed with Enoch's presence beside me.

"Are you about ready to go Mark? Your grandparents are expecting us." Mom called from the bottom of the stairs.

I stood, then noticed the waistcoat draped over the chair.

"I'll be down in just a minute. I'm changing." I called out, then pulled my T-shirt off over my head.

Chapter 4: 'Family Dinner' or 'Hell on Earth'

Enoch seemed unusually quiet as I finished dressing, but I knew that mom was waiting, so I had to hurry.

"I'm sorry that I have to go, but I'll be back as soon as I can." I said as I looked in the mirror.

I got a strange feeling from Enoch that I couldn't identify, it was kind of distant and troubled, but not really upset.

It took me a few minutes to get my hair to lay down. I'm used to letting the mop kind of hang however it wants to. But once it was gelled into submission, I checked myself over in the mirror one last time, then turned to Enoch who was at my side.

"I'll miss you too." I whispered with regret, then hurried downstairs.

* * * * *

"Mark? Wow, your grandparents aren't going to know what to think of you." Mom said with surprise.

"Does it look okay?" I asked hesitantly.

I thought I looked good, but I didn't want to take the chance of looking like some kind of big dork being dressed like this.

"You look wonderful. I thought it was strange when you decided to get the old clothes cleaned, but if it means you'll be dressing like this, I'm all for it. Now I can't wait to show you off." Mom said with a smile.

"Okay. Thanks." I said with relief.

"We'd better get going. Your grandma gets a little put out when she makes a meal and people are late." Mom said as she started walking toward the door.

I started to follow as I was trying to get used to the feeling of wearing a long sleeved shirt.

"Did you remember to shut your window?" Mom asked as we reached the front door.

"Yeah. It's closed up tight." I said seriously.

"Good. Otherwise you'd be coming home to a sandbox in your bedroom." Mom said as she walked out.

It wasn't nearly as hot outside as it was the day before. It was still somewhere between hell and the surface of the sun, but at least I could breathe.

"Aren't you going to lock the house?" I asked as we walked toward the car.

"Why? There's probably not another living soul for at least twenty miles in any direction." Mom said frankly.

"Oh. Um, okay." I said, not feeling reassured by the statement.

* * * * *

The trip to my grandparents' place was made in silence.

I can't say that there was any real scenery to look at along the way, but I kept looking out the window, absorbing the surroundings of my new home.

Finally Mom broke the silence by saying, "When we get there I'll need you to get out and open the gate."

"Sure." I muttered as we made a left turn at a little convenience store in the middle of nowhere.

"It's not far now." Mom said, and I could hear bubbling happiness in her voice.

I felt a flutter of anxiety begin in my stomach.

I had never met my grandmother before. I didn't really know what to expect.

"Get ready Mark." Mom said as we made a right turn onto a dirt road.

"I'm ready." I said cautiously as I noticed that the road was running parallel to a fence.

"This is your grandfather's property." Mom said happily.

I looked through the fence at a big open field of... nothing.

"This place has been in the family almost as long as the main house." Mom said as she guided the car down the uneven road.

I looked out the back window to see the cloud of dust that she was kicking up behind us.

"There it is." Mom said and began to slow the car.

I turned and looked ahead, expecting to see a house. Instead, I saw a gate at the side of the road.

I got out of the car and ran ahead to open the gate.

Once Mom had driven the car through, I closed the gate behind her, then got back in the car.

"Why do they have a gate? I mean, do they have cows or something?" I asked as I settled back into my seat.

"Yes. I don't know how many they have now, but dad keeps all kinds of livestock." Mom said happily as she drove us down a bumpy road.

I nodded silently as I watched ahead of us, hoping to catch a glimpse of my grandparents' house.

The road started to curve to the left and I looked over to see if that's where the house was.

The place was big. Not nearly as big as our house, but still pretty big. The entire house was all on one level, but it was really spread out.

"Here we are!" Mom said with excitement.

The butterflies in my stomach seemed to have grown claws.

Grandpa was okay when I met him, but... I just didn't know what to expect.

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"Patsy! Come on in. Your mother was worried that you'd be held up at the store. She always swears that she's going to get lost in that place." Grandpa said as he pulled Mom into a hug.

"Well, I can see how that could happen. That place is huge. I actually asked them to page Mark when I got there rather than try to find him on my own." Mom said happily as she let him go.

"Well look at you Mark. You're looking very proper today." Grandpa said and gave me a quick squeeze on my shoulder.

"This is one of the things I got dry cleaned." I said shyly.

"It looks very nice." Grandpa said fondly as he led us into the house.

"Let's go into the kitchen. I know your grandmother has been on pins and needles about meeting you since we found out that you were coming." Grandpa said, then led us out of the living room and into a hallway.

"I think Mark is a little nervous about it too." Mom said with a smile.

Sometimes I just want to smack her.

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"Hattie, Patsy and Mark are here." Grandpa said as he led us into the kitchen.

"Oh, Patsy. Come here." My grandmother said as she moved a skillet off the burner of the stove.

"Hi mom. How are you doing?" My mom asked, sounding like she was about to cry.

My grandmother kissed her on the cheek and said, "As good as ever. Did you get plenty of rest after your trip? Your father said that you looked like you'd been rode hard and put up wet."

I don't know exactly what that means, but it sounds kind of nasty.

"Yeah. I'm fine now." Mom said quietly.

"Now introduce me to my grandson." my grandmother said firmly as she released Mom from the hug.

"Mom, this is Mark." my mom said proudly.

"Hi." I said timidly, not really sure just what I was feeling at that moment.

"Well come here Mark. Aren't you the proper little gentleman." Grandma said, then engulfed me in a hug.

"Hattie, it looks like you're scorching the gravy." Grandpa said a moment later.

"Then go over and stir it. Or did your arms suddenly stop working?" She asked firmly while she was still hugging me.

"Yes dear." Grandpa said with resignation and walked to the stove.

"Why don't you men get some iced tea and go into the living room? Everyone should be showing up soon and you need to be out there to welcome them." Grandma said as she released me.

"You heard the boss. Come on Mark." Grandpa said as he walked to my side.

I smiled and walked with him back out into the hallway.

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"Who else is coming?" I asked as we walked into the living room.

"Joe Bob and his brood and your Aunt Prissy." Grandpa said as he took a seat in a recliner.

"Prissy?" I asked cautiously then took a seat on the couch.

"Short for Priscilla. But I think Prissy describes her best." Grandpa said frankly.

"Oh, um. Sounds great." I said without enthusiasm.

"My boy. You can pick your friends, but you're stuck with your family. You've got no choice but to accept them how they are." Grandpa said sagely.

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm probably not going to like my Aunt Prissy?" I asked cautiously.

"Because you probably won't. At least, I don't think I've ever met anyone who did... well, except for that husband of hers. But they're two of a kind." Grandpa said distantly.

A honking horn interrupted any further conversation.

"Sounds like Joe Bob's here." Grandpa said with a smile.

"Do you want me to answer the door?" I asked when I noticed that Grandpa wasn't getting up from his recliner.

"No. Joe Bob knows he's always welcomed here. He'll just let himself in. You remember that Mark. You and your mom are family. Act like it." Grandpa said firmly.

"I will." I said with a smile.

My grandpa seems to be a really great guy.

"GRANDPA!" A teenage girl said as she ran into the room and climbed onto grandpa's lap.

"How's my little Emmylou doing today?" Grandpa asked gently as he hugged the girl.

"I'm doing good. Daddy says that he's gonna take me to the mall next week and let me buy somethin nice for my birthday." Emmylou said joyfully.

"Well, you need to make sure you stop by here and show me what you bought the next time you come out." Grandpa said warmly.

"I will. I promise." The girl said, then gave grandpa a kiss on the cheek.

"You must be Mark." A tall thin man who looked to be about thirty years old said as he walked up to me.

I stood and said, "That's right."

"I'm Joe Bob. That there's my daughter Emmylou." He said in a low, casual voice that held an unmistakable Texas drawl.

Then he pointed behind him and said, "This here's my second son, Jim Bob and his little brother Beau."

I looked behind Joe Bob to see two boys, one tall and thin, the other shorter and thin.

"Joe Bob James?" I asked cautiously.

"Nope, Parker. Joe Bob Parker. My momma was a James just like yours." He said with a warm smile.

Emmylou had climbed off Grandpa's lap and walked up to face me.

The girl had some really big breasts and was wearing a half tee shirt and cut off blue jeans... I mean really cut off.

"Daddy says you're my cousin Mark. It's nice to meet you. I'm Emmylou." She said in a soft voice as she pulled me into a hug.

She started rubbing against me and I looked at Joe Bob helplessly.

"Emmylou, you git down off that boy and git in the kitchen. Go see if yer gramma needs some help." Joe Bob said firmly.

"But daddy..." Emmylou said in a whine as she slowly released me.

"Go on now. You'll have time to visit with your cousin later." Joe Bob said firmly.

Emmylou hung her head, then slowly walked away.

I watched her go, not quite sure of what I was feeling.

"She's gittin to be more like her momma every day." Joe Bob said as he took a seat on the couch.

I looked at Joe Bob with surprise at the statement.

"The way she's doin, it's a wonder that she's gonna make it to fourteen without gettin pregnant." Joe Bob said frankly.

"She's thirteen?" I asked in a squeak.

"Yeah, she's what they call an 'early bloomer'." Joe Bob said with a worried look.

"She needs to learn to cover up her petals or she's gonna get plucked." Grandpa said frankly.

Joe Bob nodded, then looked over at me.

"Mark, has Harlan shown you around the place yet?" Joe Bob asked curiously.

It took me a second to realize that he was talking about Grandpa, but I finally said, "No. I got here right before you did."

"Jim Bob, why don't you and Beau show Mark around the place? I need to talk to y'all's grandpa for a minute." Joe Bob said seriously.

A shy nod was Jim Bob's only answer as he stood.

I waited a moment to see which way the two boys were going, then followed them out of the room.

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"That's the chicken pen." Beau said happily as he pointed.

After glancing at the chicken pen, I nodded then looked carefully at Jim Bob.

From his posture, I got the sense that he was horribly shy.

"There's the rabbit hutch! Let's go see the rabbits." Beau said with excitement and raced ahead of us.

Jim Bob altered his course and walked with me to the small, open ended building.

I decided to try to break the ice and quietly asked Jim Bob, "So what are the schools like around here?"

"They suck!" Beau said firmly.

I smiled at the younger boy as he was going from cage to cage looking at the rabbits.

I decided to try again and quietly asked, "Are the classes hard?"

"Jim Bob gets really good grades, so he probably doesn't think so. But I think that history is really hard and just stupid." Beau said seriously.

I decided to give the interrogation a rest for a while and let Jim Bob make the next move.

As we left the rabbit hutch, Beau happily said, "That's Tommy."

I looked where he was pointing and smiled when I saw a large turkey slowly walking toward us.

"Grandpa sometimes puts his tool belt on Tommy's back because Tommy likes to follow him around." Beau said as he walked up to the turkey and petted it gently.

I smiled at the story and could easily imagine Grandpa walking around the place doing chores with his turkey helper following close behind.

"Shit! Prissy's here." Beau said as he looked past the house at the road.

"Language." Jim Bob said in nearly a whisper, then turned away to hide his face from me.

I turned my attention back to Beau so Jim Bob wouldn't feel like I was staring at him.

"Prissy being here is worth a shit or two. Ask daddy, he'll tell you." Beau said firmly.

I smiled at the statement, having no doubt that Beau was right.

"We'd better get back in the house or Grandpa will send Dougie out here." Beau said with a sour look.

Jim Bob nodded and started walking toward the house.

"Who's Dougie?" I asked quietly.

"He's Aunt Prissy's kid. He's stuck up and mean and he picks his nose and eats his boogers." Beau said with disgust.

"Um, okay." I said reluctantly as I followed.

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The three of us walked in through the back door and made our way to the living room.

Just as we walked in from the hallway, two people walked in the front door.

The woman had to be my Aunt Prissy. She had the same dark hair and eyes as my mother, but her face seemed to be more pointy and her hair... well, I've just never seen anyone with hair quite that tall before.

I mean, it wasn't Marie Antoinette tall, but it was definitely stacked higher than the average hair.

"Oh, you must be Mark!" Prissy said in a really fake sounding high voice, like she was just putting it on for show.

"Yes Ma'am." I said reluctantly, not quite sure how to deal with this woman.

"It's hard to believe that Patsy and that policeman of hers could produce such a fine looking young man." Prissy said in a gushing voice.

What are you supposed to say when someone insults both your parents and gives you a compliment in the same breath?

I decided to play it safe and just be polite.

"I've been told that the James family genes really stand out in me." I said carefully.

It was true.

Mom and Dad always said that I had the James family features. I had the same dark hair and eyes as my mom.

"Yes they do. And you dress so nicely. Maybe you would like to come to church with my family this Sunday." She said in her false polite way.

"No thank you. I don't go to church." I said as courteously as I could.

Well, the silence that followed was deafening.

I looked around and was surprised to see that even Grandpa and Joe Bob were frozen in place, watching to see what Prissy's reaction was going to be.

I glanced at the pudgy kid at her hip in time to see him stick his finger in his nose.

"Y'all get in here. We're puttin the food on the table." Grandma's voice called from the hallway.

Relief washed through the room as everyone stood.

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"Do you need any help?" I asked as I saw Mom carrying two bowls into the room.

"No honey, we've got it. Why don't you take the second seat on this side of the table so you'll be by me?" Mom asked as she sat the bowls down.

I went to the chair and sat down, then looked down the long table at everyone else taking their places.

"Is Lindie alright? I expected you to bring the whole squad." Grandpa said casually as he took his seat.

"Oh, she'll be fine. She's feelin' queasy like she always does when she's this far along. Besides, she doesn't like to take the twins out when she knows there's gonna be a dust storm. She wants to keep 'em in the bedroom with the humidifier goin'." Joe Bob said seriously.

"What about Joe Bob Junior?" Grandpa asked curiously.

"Oh, I didn't get to tell you. He got promoted to assistant manager, so he's working the early shift now." Joe Bob said proudly.

"That boy's a real go getter. I'm sure he'll have his own McDonalds store before you know it." Grandpa said with a fond smile.

I watched Joe Bob's expression carefully. He was looking so proud of his son that he was about to burst.

When Mom walked back into the room with a big bowl of salad, Aunt Prissy said, "So Mark tells me you're raising him to be a heathen."

I couldn't believe that she said that and looked at Mom to see what her reaction would be.

Mom leaned in and placed the salad on the table, then said, "Derek and I thought it would be better for Mark to grow up feeling free to believe what he thinks is right."

"How's he supposed to learn right from wrong without a good Christian upbringing?" Aunt Prissy asked firmly.

"From his parents. We provided the example and taught him what we believe. I don't think forcing him to sit while someone screams it him from a pulpit would make him a better person." Mom said, then took the seat beside mine.

"He's going to burn in hell and it's going to be your fault for not raising him to be a Christian." Aunt Prissy said with a cold stare across the table at my mother.

Mom looked like she was about to lose it. I don't think I've ever seen her so mad.

"Priss. How I raise my son is none of your damned business." Mom said in a growl.

Aunt Prissy quickly reached over and put her hands over Dougie's ears as she harshly whispered, "You don't have to swear in front of the children! Now I can see what kind of example you're setting for Mark."

Silence fell over the room again.

Beau tugged on his father's arm and quietly asked, "When did she swear?"

Joe Bob smiled at his son and said in a low voice, "Prissy thinks 'damn' is a swear word that kids your age shouldn't hear."

Beau looked at his father with surprise and said, "Oh. I thought she said 'fuck' or something and I missed it."

Everyone except Prissy was trying to contain their chuckles at the innocent statement.

Joe Bob leaned over and gave Beau a firm hug and a kiss on the top of the head.

"Where did mom go?" My mom asked from beside me.

"She's probably back getting your Aunt Alma." Grandpa said without concern.

"Aunt Alma is here?" Mom asked with surprise.

"Oh, I thought you knew that she moved in with us last year." Grandpa said frankly.

"No. I thought she was living in Florida with Uncle Buddy." Mom said slowly.

"She wanted to come home to Texas... She said that Uncle George didn't like it there." Grandpa said in a disturbed voice.

"But Uncle George is dead... Oh." Mom finished quietly.

"Don't worry Patsy. She's still pretty sharp except for that. And she's just as feisty as ever." Joe Bob said cheerfully.

Mom smiled at him and nodded.

"Come on Alma, it's right in here." Grandma said gently from the hallway.

"I know where it is. I'm not so feeble minded that I can't find my way around." An elderly woman, Aunt Alma, said as she walked slowly into the room at Grandma's side.

"If that's the case, why did I find you knocking around in the pantry the other night at two in the morning?" Grandma asked seriously.

"I was hungry for some peaches." Aunt Alma said immediately.

"Whatever you say Alma." Grandma said with an indulgent smile as she guided the elderly woman to the chair across from Mom's.

As soon as Aunt Alma was seated, she looked around the table and her gaze stopped on me.

"Mark?" She asked in shock.

"Yes." I said hesitantly.

"Oh, you came back! Come around here and give me a hug. I've missed you so much!" She said as tears filled her eyes.

I looked at Mom with question to find her looking back with complete confusion.

I hesitantly stood and walked around the table.

Aunt Alma looked at me as I approached and said, "You haven't changed a lick in... what is it? Ninety... Nearly a hundred years."

Everyone around the table shared looks of confusion as I finally walked to her side.

I leaned in to give her a gentle hug and she grabbed hold of me with an iron grip.

I could feel her boney fingers digging into my arms and I was sure that she was going to leave bruises.

"I still have your picture, the one you took the day you left." Aunt Alma said seriously as she looked me in the eyes.

I was so shocked that I didn't know what to say.

"Mark, Alma is your Great Great Aunt." Grandma explained quietly.

That little bit of information wasn't going to help me at the moment. It felt like Great Great Aunt She-Hulk was about to rip my arms out of their sockets and she didn't show any signs of being ready to let go.

"Come on Mark. I want to show you the picture. But you'll have to help me up. I'm not as limber as I used to be." She finished with a sad chuckle.

"Aunt Alma, we're sitting down to eat right now." Grandma said in a gentle voice.

"Hattie, my big brother and I are going to my room for a few minutes. You can wait for us or eat without us. It's of no concern to me." Aunt Alma said firmly then slowly stood.

"Then I guess you'd better get going so we won't have so long to wait." Grandma said with resignation.

Aunt Alma was holding tightly to my arm and started walking us toward the door.

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"George says that you're not really my Mark, is that true?" Aunt Alma asked quietly as we slowly walked down the hallway.

"I'm afraid so. I'm Patsy's son. I guess I'm your great great nephew." I said gently.

"But you are the spitting image of him. When you see the picture you'll see what I mean." She said quietly.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't be him for you. It was nice to see you so happy."

She chuckled, then asked, "Would you do me one small favor?"

"Sure, I'll do whatever I can." I said seriously.

"Would you call me Allie? That's what my big brother Mark used to call me and I've wanted to hear it again for so long." She said in a voice of desperate longing.

"Of course I will Allie. If it means that I'll get to see you happy, I'll even be your big brother if you want me to." I said as I placed my hand over hers.

"Thank you, I think I would like that... what did you say your name was?" Aunt Alma asked curiously.

"Well Allie, my name really is Mark. Mark Taylor." I said with a smile.

She chuckled, then pulled on my arm to guide me into one of the bedrooms.

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I walked with her into the room and to the dresser.

She picked up a jewelry box from the center of the dresser, then carried it with her to an arm chair by the bed.

"Sit down Mark. This will just take me a minute." She said as she got settled into the chair, then opened the jewelry box.

I took a moment to look around the room, then noticed something strange. I blinked my eyes and looked again, then realized that it was the same kind of thing I almost saw when I was looking at Enoch.

"Are you George?" I asked as I looked at the vague presence.

Between one heartbeat and the next, he was gone.

"What dear?" Aunt Alma asked as she looked up from the jewelry box and over her shoulder where the presence was now standing.

"Oh..." She said with a nod then looked at me.

"You scared the hell out of him." She said frankly.

I stood and faced the presence, then said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to surprise you. I just thought that since Gr... Allie talks to someone named George that it was probably you."

Aunt Alma pulled an old envelope out of the bottom of the jewelry box, then said, "George is my late husband... I suppose that would make him your great great uncle."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance Great Great Uncle George." I said then bowed slowly, doing my best estimation of a proper greeting.

"He wants you to call him George." Aunt Alma said with a peaceful smile, then patted the bed beside her chair, indicating for me to take a seat.

I took the offered seat, then looked down at something that Aunt Alma was holding.

"This is my older brother, Mark." she said quietly.

I carefully took the picture from her, then realized that it wasn't printed on paper, it was on tin.

"That was taken the day you... he left. The man I met some forty years later who claimed to be my brother... that wasn't him." she said sadly as she pointed at the picture in my hand with one shaky finger.

I looked at the picture and stared in shock.

It was me.

The guy in the picture was even dressed like me, except that he was wearing a suit jacket but... his hair was just exactly like mine. Even his eyebrows were just like mine. But somehow, the look in his eyes was different. A look that I'd never want to have.

"When he left I was so unhappy. I kept to my room for weeks, just crying." She said distantly.

"I'm sure he had his reasons..." I said helplessly since I was sure of no such thing.

"It wasn't just me. The one he hurt the most was his friend... goodness... what was his name?" She said as she strained to remember.

"Enoch." I whispered, hoping I was wrong.

"Yes. Of course. Oh, that poor boy. As heartbroken as I was about my big brother leaving, it was even worse for poor Enoch. They were the best of friends." Alma said gravely.

"Will you tell me what happened to Enoch?" I asked quietly as my heart lurched.

"That's just the thing. No one really knows. Whatever happened, I know for a fact that he never left the house. I heard him too many nights and I even thought I saw him a few times. Father swore that he ran away, but eventually he even admitted that he didn't know what happened to the poor boy. Father had a grave stone made for him in the family graveyard even though his body was never found." Alma said quietly.

"Gramma wants to know if you're almost ready." Dougie said from Alma's doorway and his finger was quickly approaching his nose.

"If I EVER see you put that finger in your nose again, I'm going to break it clean off." Alma said in an icy voice that sent a shiver up my spine.

"MOMMY!" Dougie screamed as he ran off down the hallway.

"Allie, I don't think scaring him like that is going to stop him for very long." I said regretfully.

She nodded and said, "I know, but maybe we'll be able to make it through dinner without watching him eat it."

"Then it was worth it." I said as I extended my arm to her in my best attempt at gentlemanly manners.

She smiled as she took hold of my arm and slowly stood.

"Don't worry George, Allie's my little sister. I'll take good care of her." I said to the vague presence behind her.

Once Alma was sure of her footing, we started walking toward the bedroom door.

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"You've done more good for me today than you'll ever know." Alma said quietly.

"All I did is call you Allie." I said as we walked slowly down the hallway.

"You talked to George. After all this time, I thought they might be right and maybe I am going a little bit mad." Alma said frankly.

"Well, they'd better never say it around me. No one is allowed to talk bad about my little sister." I said as seriously as I could.

She chuckled and said, "Thank you for that Mark. Even though I know you're not him, having you here is like passing a signpost that says I'm on the way home."

After a moment, she quietly asked, "Did that make any kind of sense at all?"

I smiled as I said, "Yes Allie, it made perfect sense."

"Have you noticed that the rest of our family are idiots?" She asked from out of the blue.

I had to fight to keep from laughing out loud at the statement, then said, "Yes Allie. I've noticed. But they're our idiots."

She nodded slowly and said, "Yes. They are."

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"Here you go Allie." I said as I helped her into her chair.

"Will you sit here next to me?" Alma asked hopefully.

"Aunt Prissy is sitting there." I said gently.

"Well she can move." Alma said firmly and flashed a quick glare at Prissy.

"Allie, that's no way to act. I'll be sitting right across from you." I said quietly.

"Alright Mark." She said reluctantly.

I leaned in to give her a gentle kiss on the forehead, then walked around the table.

You could have heard a pin drop in the room as everyone stared at me.

I looked around as I took my seat, then asked, "Is it okay to eat now?"

"We need to bless the food." Aunt Prissy said with a glare at my mom.

"Then hurry the hell up. I'm not getting any younger here." Aunt Alma said sternly.

Way to go Alma!

"Please Aunt Alma, not in front of the children." Aunt Prissy said in a scandalized whisper.

Beau tugged on his father's arm again then looked at him with question.

"She said 'hell'." Joe Bob said with a smile.

"You mean I been cussin all this time when I said 'damn' and 'hell' and never even knew it?" Beau asked in confusion.

"That's right. You're my foul mouthed boy." Joe Bob said as he gave Beau a quick hug.

"LORD! Please bless this food..." Aunt Prissy called out, obviously trying to draw all attention to her.

"...and guide your lost children to repent from their sinful ways." She continued in a tone of voice that signaled that she was just getting started.

From the sound of it, we might need a snack to get us through the blessing.

"As it says in your Holy word, 'Yea verily...'"

"Amen." Grandpa snapped.

"Amen." Everyone else around the table quickly repeated and started to eat.

"Daddy. Mark's my second cousin. So that means we could get married, right?" Emmylou asked from a few places down the table from me.

Before I could even think to say anything, Joe Bob said, "You don't need to be worryin about that Emmylou. Just worry bout that plate of food in front of you for right now."

"Yes Daddy." Emmylou said quietly.

Aunt Prissy looked at Emmylou with disgust.

"So Patsy, how are you two settling into the big house?" Grandma asked from out of nowhere.

It took a second for mom to swallow the food she had been eating, but finally she said, "We're doing very well. Mark unloaded everything from the car while I was sleeping last night and even helped me do the shopping this morning. With all his help it really hasn't been that difficult."

I smiled at mom's praise. I really haven't been that much help. I left her to put all the groceries away on her own. But still, it's nice to be appreciated.

"Oh. It's good to know that Mark is helping you out. That should make things go much more smoothly." Grandma said with a fond smile at me.

I couldn't help but blush at all the attention. Maybe family isn't such a bad thing.

"Is that all you're eating? We have plenty of food." Grandma asked with concern as she looked at my plate.

I don't usually eat very much, but my plate was looking a little empty.

I only had some salad and a small portion of peas and carrots.

I reached over and grabbed a piece of chicken from the platter in front of me, then looked at grandma with question.

"Try a dab of mashed potatoes and gravy too." she said gently.

I nodded, then looked around the table to see where they were.

"Jim Bob? Would you pass me the mashed potatoes?" I asked quietly.

Jim Bob grabbed the mashed potatoes, then started them down the line of people toward me.

He seemed to be blushing and I wondered why he was so horribly shy.

Once I got the mashed potatoes, I put a reasonable sized spoon of them on my plate and made a little well for the gravy.

"Here's the gravy." Mom said from beside me.

I handed her the mashed potatoes and took the gravy from her.

It wasn't the brown gravy that I'm used to, it was white. I spooned a little over the mashed potatoes then sat the gravy in a small open space on the table in front of me.

As I picked up the piece of chicken, I noticed that it was oddly shaped.

"So Mark, did y'all eat rabbit back in Michigan?" Joe Bob asked casually as I raised the piece of meat to take a bite.

I put it back down and said, "No. I don't think so, did we Mom?"

"No honey. There's not a lot of rabbit in the supermarkets there." Mom said with a smile.

I smiled at Joe Bob for letting me know what I was about to eat.

I'm not squeamish about trying new things, but it's just nice to be prepared first.

Slowly, I picked up the piece of rabbit and took a bite.

Wow! Guess what. It tastes like chicken.

"It's good." I said with a smile at Grandma.

"I used the drippings to make the gravy. Give it a try." Grandma said with pride.

I took a small bite of the mashed potatoes and gravy. It was pretty good.

"Tastes great." I said with a smile.

"Hold it!" Aunt Prissy hissed at Dougie in a harsh whisper.

"But I gotta go." Dougie said in a whine.

"You need to learn to hold it so you won't disrupt our dinner." Aunt Prissy said firmly.

"Priss. If he shits his pants while we're eating it's going to 'disrupt' our dinner a whole lot worse." Joe Bob said seriously, then continued, "Dougie, go on and do what you need to do now. I'm gonna talk to your momma."

Dougie hopped up from his chair and ran out of the room.

"This is none of your business Joe Bob. I don't even know what you're doing here. Today should be for family." Aunt Prissy snarled.

"Hold it right there Prissy." Grandpa said in a firm voice.

"Joe Bob is family. He's your cousin. He's got a full-time job and eight kids, and he still finds the time to come over here and help me out. The only time you and yours show up is when there's free food laying out on the table." Grandpa said as he looked her in the eyes.

Aunt Prissy stood and said in a dramatic voice, "I know when I'm not welcomed."

"Prissy, you're welcomed to come over, you're welcomed to eat dinner. But you're not welcomed to disrespect my other guests. Now sit your ass down

and eat, you're too thin." Grandpa said as he held her gaze.

Aunt Prissy thought for a moment, then sat down as she quietly said, "I'm sorry Joe Bob. I shouldn't have said that."

"I ain't worried about it Priss. But try to ease up on Dougie, you're putting too much pressure on him. He needs to be a kid." Joe Bob said with concern.

"What do you know about it?" Aunt Prissy asked defensively.

"After the first three or four kids, I kinda got a feel for the right thing to do. I'm just saying that it may be time to loosen the apron strings a little bit. The boy needs to start making some decisions for himself." Joe Bob said quietly.

Aunt Prissy didn't look convinced, but she nodded and went back to eating.

Dougie walked back into the room and took the seat at his mother's side.

Before anyone else could say anything, I heard the house creak and the windows rattle.

Grandpa got up and walked to the large window.

"I hate to cut the meal short, but it looks like the storm's gonna be here in about half an hour. If y'all are gonna be headin out, now would be the time." Grandpa said seriously.

"I think we should be goin. I know Lindie gets a little skittish in a dust storm. She's always afraid the roof of the trailer is going to come off." Joe Bob said frankly.

"What do you think Mark?" Mom asked from beside me.

"I think we should go too. I'm still kinda tired after the trip." I said as I thought about how badly I wanted to get back to Enoch.

"You slept almost the entire time. I was the one who was driving." Mom said incredulously.

"Yeah, it just wore me out watching you do that." I said with a teasing smile.

Mom chuckled and said, "Let's go."

"Harlan. I'm going to walk around the place to make sure everything is closed up before we leave. Mark, do you want to come with me?" Joe Bob asked as he walked toward the hallway.

By the way he asked, it wasn't really a question. But even if it was, I would want to help him. I really like Joe Bob.

I got up from the table and hurried to Joe Bob's side.

"Why don't you young'uns help your grandma clear off the table?" Joe Bob said before we left the room.

* * * * *

We walked outside and I noticed that there was something like a brownish-red cloud on the horizon.

"Help me put the tarp down on the rabbit hutch." Joe Bob said in a voice of distant thought.

"You'll have to tell me what to do." I said as I followed him.

"Just take an end and help me unroll it." He said as he reached up and unfastened a rolled up tarp at the top of the doorway.

I reached up and did the same at the other end, then we slowly unrolled the tarp until it reached the ground.

"Harlan tells me that you're gay." Joe Bob said quietly.

I stopped all movement as I looked at him with surprise.

After a moment, Joe Bob looked at me and said, "I got no problem with it. I just wanted to ask you about some things."

"Um... Okay, but... how did he know?" I asked cautiously.

"Your momma told him a while back. I guess when you told her, she wasn't sure about what to do so she asked your grandpa." Joe Bob said with a shrug, then started to tie off the bottom of the tarp to a post at the side of the rabbit hutch.

I found the loose pieces of rope at the bottom of the tarp and started doing the same at my end.

I thought about how I felt about everyone knowing that I was gay. I didn't plan on keeping it a secret or anything, but I kind of thought that I'd be able to tell people after I got to know them.

"I'm worried about Jim Bob. I'm thinkin that maybe he's gay too but I don't know how to talk to him about it to find out." Joe Bob said with concern.

Joe Bob's worry drew me out of my thoughts of myself and I considered what he was saying.

"I thought that since you was gay, that maybe you could help me figure out what to do for him." Joe Bob said, then motioned for me to walk with him toward the chicken pen.

"Does he know that I'm gay?" I asked in thought.

"No. I didn't think it was my place to tell him." Joe Bob said frankly, then motioned for me to help him pull a tarp down on one side of the chicken wire enclosure.

I started to unroll the tarp as I said, "Well, maybe you could talk to him and tell him that you know that I'm gay and that it's okay with you."

Joe Bob nodded as he started to tie off his end of the tarp.

"That way he knows that you don't have a problem with it and he might feel comfortable enough to talk to you about it. Or maybe if he knows that I'm gay, he'll come to me to ask some questions." I said uncertainly.

"Yeah. I can do that on the drive back home. That is, if you don't mind that I tell Beau and Emmylou at the same time." Joe Bob said distantly.

I smiled and said, "I don't mind at all. Maybe Emmylou will stop being so interested in me."

Joe Bob chuckled and said, "She might take it as a challenge."

I smiled as Joe Bob handed me the end of a water hose.

"Hold that in the trough over there so the livestock can have some water if they need it." Joe Bob said as he pointed at a long trough on the other side of a fence.

I reached through the fence and held the hose in the trough, then watched as water started pouring.

"C'mon Tommy, you need to get in'ta the barn now." Joe Bob said to the large turkey who was a few feet away from him.

The turkey walked slowly to Joe Bob's side, then followed him into the shed behind the rabbit hutch.

I looked out onto the horizon and saw that the reddish cloud was a little bit closer to us, but still quite a way off.

* * * * *

"That's good enough." Joe Bob said as he turned off the water.

I took the hose back to him and he coiled it up into the box beside the faucet.

"What would you think if Jim Bob and maybe Beau spent a few days at your house with you and your ma?" Joe Bob asked as he walked to my side.

"They both seem really nice, so it would be fine with me, but I guess it depends on if they want to." I said cautiously.

Joe Bob smiled and said, "We'll see how things go with our talk and take it from there."

"Yeah. Sounds good." I said happily.

"We're done out here. We'd better get going if we're gonna get home before the storm hits." Joe Bob said as he put an arm around my shoulders and guided me toward the house.

"Thanks Joe Bob." I said as I put an arm around his waist and gave him a quick hug.

"It's me that should be thanking you Mark. Something's wrong with Jim Bob and you're the only one I know who might be able to help." Joe Bob said seriously.

"I'll do whatever I can. I promise." I said as we reached the back door.

* * * * *

"You need to say your goodbyes so we can go." Mom said as Joe Bob and I walked into the living room.

"Okay." I said, then walked to Grandpa and said, "I hope I can come over and visit a lot. I really like it here."

"It was nice having you Mark. You're always welcome." Grandpa said as he hugged me.

As soon as Grandpa had released me, Grandma pulled me into a hug and said, "Your mom's been telling us about you since the day you were born. It's good to know that she wasn't exaggerating."

"Thanks Grandma." I said as I hugged her tightly and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Next was Aunt Prissy.

Uncomfortable was an understatement, but like Grandpa said, 'You're stuck with your family. You've got no choice but to accept them how they are.'

"Maybe after I get settled in, I could go to church with you one Sunday, just to try it out?" I said cautiously.

Aunt Prissy looked at me with surprise, then a big smile came over her face.

"I tell you what Mark. If I find out that the preacher is about to have a really good sermon one week, I'll give you a call to invite you." She said in a voice that sounded sincere.

"Thanks Aunt Prissy." I said quietly.

As I walked away from Aunt Prissy, I saw Aunt Alma sitting in the recliner.

"I'm going to have to go now Allie." I said as I squatted to be closer to her eye level.

"I know. Here, take this." Allie said and handed me the tin photograph.

"I can't take this, it's your brother." I said in shock.

"I don't need it anymore. Now that you're here, that chapter of my life is finally closed." She said with contentment.

"I'm glad. I'll be back to visit again just as soon as I can." I said gently.

"Thank you Mark. I love you." Aunt Alma said peacefully.

"I love you too Allie." I said, then leaned in to give her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"We'd better get going." Mom said from beside the door.

I gave Aunt Alma a quick hug, then hurried to Mom's side.

After one last look at our family, we left for home.

Chapter 5: Facing the Storm

When I got out of the car to open the gate, I noticed that Joe Bob was pulling up behind mom.

I motioned for him to go through, then closed the gate behind us.

I saw mom waving at him as he drove around her car, then I hurried to get the gate closed before running back to join her.

"Mark, I'm so proud of you. From the expression you were wearing when we arrived, I didn't know what to expect when you met the family." Mom said as she pulled away from the gate.

"Well, I didn't know either. I had no idea what to expect, and that was kinda scary. But I really enjoyed meeting everyone." I said consideringly.

"Even Prissy?" Mom asked with a pained smile.

I chuckled and said, "She wasn't so bad, once I figured out where she was coming from."

"Then you're doing better than I am because I don't have a clue about what she's thinking. We grew up as best friends. People thought we were twins because we were so close. But when I was about fifteen, she started changing. She seemed to think that she was better than everyone else and that whatever she believed was the truth. Anyone who didn't believe the same as her was just an ignorant fool." Mom said distantly.

"You do understand her. She believes that she's right and as long as you play by the rules she's set up in her own little world, then you're accepted. If you go against the stuff she believes, then you're a fool... or a heathen." I finished with a grin.

Mom chuckled and said, "Thanks for making peace with her. It was nice to see her happy. Even though I can't stand the sight of her, I still care about how she feels."

I glanced at mom to see an expression of peace.

It made me feel good to know that I had something to do with her being able to feel that.

* * * * *

After we had made the first turn off the dirt road, Mom quietly asked, "So what did you think of Joe Bob?"

"He was great. I think he's really an awesome guy." I said with a smile.

Mom grinned to herself and seemed to be considering what she should say.

I waited for a moment so she would continue, it looked like she was about to tell a secret.

"When we were growing up, I had such a crush on him." Mom said, then let a girlish giggle escape.

I couldn't help but smile at her timid expression.

"I think that when I met your father in college, the first thing that attracted me to him was that he reminded me of Joe Bob." Mom said in a quieter voice.

"Dad? My dad?" I asked incredulously.

Mom chuckled and said, "Yes. Back when we were in college, he was a lot more relaxed. Nothing seemed to bother him and he just had this... joy of life."

"My dad? The one in Michigan?" I asked slowly.

"Yes. Your dad. He's changed a lot over the years. He wasn't always the serious police detective who only thinks about his work." Mom said with a glance at me.

I thought about that for a moment, then said, "I'll just have to take your word for it."

Before Mom could respond to that, the ring tone of her cell phone came from her purse.

"I'll get it." I said automatically as I pulled open her purse and began to dig.

I really don't get it. What does anyone need with this much stuff? I mean, I carry a wallet with me and don't need most of the things in it. She has... I don't even know what most of these things are.

"Hello?" I said quickly, not quite sure if I'd caught it before the voicemail kicked in.

"Mark? I thought this was your mom's cell phone." The female voice said with confusion.

"It is, Mom's driving so I answered it for her, who is this?" I asked cautiously, I should probably know but the voice didn't sound familiar.

"This is Diana Arden, your mom and I went to college together. Is there any way I can talk to her? It's kind of important." The woman asked with a tone of urgency.

I turned to mom and said, "It's Diana Arden. She says it's kind of important."

"I'll pull over. Tell her I'll be right with her." Mom said as she guided the car to the side of the road.

"Just a sec." I said into the phone, then held it out for mom when she was ready.

Mom quickly took the phone and said, "Do you have some good news for me Di?"

A big smile came over Mom's face, then she gave me an eager thumbs up.

I remember seeing pictures of Diana when Mom and Dad would go through their albums and stuff, but I don't think I ever met her.

"When?" Mom asked quickly.

I looked at her with question. She seemed to be really excited.

"Mark, would you get my PDA? I need to get this down." Mom asked with distraction.

Shit! Another dive into the mobile junkyard that she carries with her.

"How good of a chance do you think I have?" Mom asked while I dug into the substrata of the purse to a fresh, heretofore undiscovered, layer of crap.

Finally I found her seldom used PDA at the bottom of her purse and quickly removed a cough drop that was stuck to the back of it.

"Thanks Mark. Go ahead Di." Mom said, then started typing something on the tiny chicklet keyboard.

"Got it. I'll call you as soon as I'm done and let you know how it went." Mom said happily as she handed the PDA to me.

"Thank you for doing this. I realize that you're putting your reputation on the line for me. I'll make sure you never regret it." Mom said seriously.

Mom gave a small chuckle, then said, "I hope so too. I'll talk to you in a little while."

When she finally rang off, I accepted the phone from her and waited for her to tell me what was going on.

"That was my old college roommate Diana." Mom said, as she pulled the car back onto the road.

I knew that, but telling Mom wasn't going to get her to tell the story any faster.

"I called Diana before we left Michigan to see if she knew of any job openings and emailed her my resume so she could pass it around to any likely prospects." Mom said quickly.

"I'm guessing she found something for you." I said cautiously.

"She gave my resume to a friend of hers in the HR office of her company. The friend just called her back and said that if I call her for a phone interview right now, she might be able to work me in for an onsite interview later this week!" Mom said with joy as she turned the car onto the dirt road that leads to our house.

"That's great! You haven't even really started looking for work and you've already got an interview." I said happily.

Yeah, part of it was just me doing the supportive son thing, but seeing her so happy was kind of nice.

"This is why it's important to have a lot of friends, especially friends in whatever field you decide to go into. The days of finding a job in the want ads is over. Networking is the best way to find a decent job now."

It sounds like her motherly advice is for me to suck up to people who might be able to do something for me. I never really noticed what a manipulative person my mom can be before. I hope it's not genetic.

Since we were pulling up in front of the house, there wasn't time for her to give me anymore of her sage advice. But I wonder what it would have been? Don't marry someone who will hold you back from your career? Don't bog yourself down by having children?

* * * * *

As soon as we were inside the house, Mom quickly said, "I'm going up to my room to make this call. It's a phone interview, so it may take a while."

I thought about how much I needed to talk to Enoch, so I said, "I think I'll take a nap. I was serious about being tired."

"Okay honey. Have a good rest. I'll wake you up for dinner if you're still asleep when it's ready." Mom said gently, then hurried up the stairs.

I stood there for a moment, then walked to one of the large windows in the living room to check on the progress of the dust storm.

The reddish brown cloud that had been on the horizon seemed to be almost to the house now.

I turned to face the stairs.

The approaching storm seemed somehow significant.

I felt the pocket of my waist coat to confirm that I still had the picture that Allie had given me.

Did he love me or the person in the picture?

Was I somehow the reincarnation of his lost lover?

Did it matter?

After taking a deep breath for courage, I started up the stairs to face the storm.

* * * * *

I walked into my room and froze at the sight before me.

There was Enoch.

I could actually see his transparent body sitting in the desk chair.

It wasn't a feeling or a blur on the edge of my vision. I could actually see him.

"I'm back." I said in astonishment.

Enoch looked up at me and his glowing smile burned itself into my heart.

'No matter what, I have to make this work. I can't lose him.' I thought to myself.

"Will you come over and sit on the bed with me? I need to talk to you about something." I said quietly, trying not to sound too ominous.

Enoch looked at me curiously before getting up from the chair and moving to the bed.

He said something to me, but I couldn't hear his voice.

I guess I didn't need to. I could see his expression and I'm not sure if I read his lips or just knew what he was asking.

"Yeah. I can see you a lot better now. I can't hear what you're saying but I can make out your features... I'm glad I can see your eyes. I really like your eyes." I finished a little bit shyly.

Enoch seemed surprised by the statement at first, but eventually broke into a smile.

I reached into my pocket and felt the tin photograph that Allie had given me.

"Enoch, I need to show you something, then I'm going to lay down so we can really talk." I said quietly.

The look of concern on his face broke my heart.

"Please, just promise me that after I show you this, that you'll talk with me. I'm not mad at you at all. I just want to understand." I said as I looked into his transparent green eyes.

My explanation didn't do anything to diminish his fear, but he did reluctantly nod that he would promise.

"Okay. I met someone that knows you today. She gave me this." I said, then pulled the photo out of my pocket.

I held the photograph out beside me where Enoch and I could both look at it.

I glanced over at Enoch to find him frozen with an expression of panic on his face.

After a moment more to look at the photograph, I walked over to place it on the desk.

"Please Enoch, just talk with me." I said quietly as I toed off my shoes.

Enoch slowly turned to look at me and the devastated expression in his eyes tore into my soul.

"I'm not mad, just talk to me." I said gently as I scooted onto the bed.

Enoch was still sitting, mostly frozen in place as I lay back and closed my eyes.

* * * * *

"Enoch?" I asked into the darkness that surrounded me.

"I'm sorry." Enoch whispered from someplace out of my sight.

"Please Enoch. I need to hold you. I'm not mad. I swear." I said as I looked around.

A glow of light appeared before me and Enoch resolved into being.

The expression in his eyes was anguished and I wanted nothing more than to do something, anything to replace it with his happy smile.

"When you first arrived... I thought..." Enoch stammered.

"Come here." I said as I opened my arms to him.

A small smile of relief found its way onto his face as he approached.

I pulled him to me and held him in a firm grip, trying to convey my love through touch.

"Thank you." He whispered into my ear.

I smiled and said, "Anytime."

The two of us stood there, holding and being held for an undefined amount of time in the unreal place where we found ourselves.

Finally Enoch said, "When you arrived, I thought it was Mark... the Mark that I knew."

"I thought so. You said that the passage of time is different here." I said quietly.

"I knew that time had passed, but somehow I made myself believe that I was mistaken and that you were the Mark that left me." Enoch finished in a whisper.

"I'm sorry he left you. Allie said that you were devastated when he left." I said quietly.

"Allie? You spoke to Allie? How is she?" Enoch asked quickly.

"She's fine. She must be over a hundred years old now. She's living with my grandparents." I said gently.

"Over a hundred..." Enoch said in wonder.

"When she saw me, she thought I was Mark James too." I said honestly.

"You do look just like him." Enoch said quietly.

"But I'm not him. You know that don't you?" I asked carefully.

"I suspected just after you arrived, but for some reason I tried to convince myself that he had returned to me." Enoch said quietly.

"But you know for sure now, right?" I asked carefully. I don't know how being in the in-between non-world where he ended up had messed with his mind and I wanted to be clear on the fact that I was not Mark James.

"Yes. I realized it in the water closet." Enoch said shyly.

I puzzled over the strange term for a moment, then realized that he meant the bathroom.

"But when you said that you wanted to reciprocate my actions... that's when I knew." Enoch said distantly.

"I don't understand." I said carefully.

"Mark, the other Mark, he would allow me to do things, to pleasure him. But he would never even consider reciprocating the action." Enoch said as his hold on me increased.

"Then he was a selfish fool." I said quietly as I also increased the intensity of my hug.

"It didn't matter. I loved him." Enoch said as his grip loosened and he pulled back a little to look in my eyes.

"I'm sorry he hurt you Enoch. You deserved someone who would love you in return." I said softly.

Enoch's hopeful look into my eyes said more than a thousand words.

"Yes Enoch. I do love you." I said in a whisper.

His expression seemed to be frozen for a moment, then he broke into a joyful smile.

I soaked in the beauty of his happiness for a moment, then moved in for a gentle kiss.

* * * * *

I don't know how long we were kissing, but it was the most wonderful, peaceful, complete feeling that I've ever known.

When we finally did pull out of the kiss, I quietly said, "I can't wait for the door to open again so we can do that for real."

Enoch seemed to be surprised by my statement, then said, "I examined the fracture while you were gone. Though the breach is quite small, it is beginning to open."

"It is? Where is it?" I asked with surprise.

"In the mirror. Come, I will show you." Enoch said and led me by the hand. As we approached the mirror, I saw something that looked like a hairline crack made of light.

"From your side of the mirror it will look like a flaw in the glass. It will remain solid unless there is someone on both sides to cause it to open." Enoch said as we stood side by side in front of the mirror.

"Mark?" I heard in the distance. It was my mom's voice.

"It must be dinner time." I said with regret.

"May we talk some more when you return?" Enoch asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'll be back just as soon as I can." I said seriously, then added in a whisper, "I love you."

"I love you as well." Enoch said with joy radiating in his eyes.

"Mark!" I heard, and now she sounded closer.

"Give me a quick kiss, then I've got to go." I said with regret.

Enoch gave me a quick firm kiss, then the world seemed to dissolve around me.

* * * * *

"Mark? You must have really been tired." Mom said as she walked into my room.

"Yeah. I guess I was." I said as I blinked my eyes.

"Since we had such a big lunch, I made us a light dinner." Mom said as she looked at me with concern.

I slowly got up off the bed and noticed that my window looked like it was covered by something brownish red.

Mom followed my gaze, then walked to my window to look out.

"Your grandfather was right. This is a side of nature that we don't get to see very often." Mom said as she stared out the window.

I walked to her side and could barely make out the barren landscape being scoured by high winds and blowing dust.

"It's beautiful in it's own way." Mom said distantly.

The hazy half-light and blowing dust seemed surreal, like something you'd expect to see on a distant world. As I stared at the scene, I could see what

she was saying. There was a terrifying kind of beauty in this violent force of nature.

"Come on. I've cooked us some tuna steaks and made a nice green salad." Mom said, as she draped an arm around my shoulder.

I turned away from the window and walked with her to the door.

* * * * *

"So how did your call go?" I asked when I sat down at the table.

"Well, I talked to a friend of Diana's in the HR department. Her name is Mandy and we talked for a few minutes about what I was qualified to do. I guess I said the right things, because the next thing I knew I was talking to someone else, doing a phone interview." Mom said happily.

"That sounds good. Do you think you got the job?" I asked, then took a bite of my food.

"Well, it isn't that easy. I think I did well on this phase of the process, but I'm not hired yet." Mom said seriously.

"When will you know?" I asked curiously.

"After my phone interview, they called me back to set up an appointment for the on site interview. I guess they were considering three people for the position and one of them dropped out, so I'm a last minute replacement. This was set up over a week ago, and I'm really lucky to get this opportunity." Mom said evasively.

"So when is the on site interview?" I asked cautiously.

"I leave tomorrow morning to fly to Santa Fe." Mom said as she reluctantly looked at me.

"Okay." I said hesitantly.

From the expression on her face, she was about to tell me something that I wasn't going to like.

"Your grandfather said I could drop you off at their house on the way to the airport." Mom said, reluctantly.

I thought for a moment, then said, "So you don't trust me to stay in the house by myself."

"It's not that. But we've just moved here and I don't want you to be all alone in the house, twenty miles from the nearest neighbor or working

phone." Mom said urgently.

"Grandpa is nice and everything, but I really don't know what I'd do over there all day. I would rather stay here and finish getting unpacked and get used to my new room." I said, honestly.

"But don't you think it would be better for you to have someone around?" Mom asked with concern.

"How long are you going to be gone?" I asked curiously.

"I'll be back tomorrow night." Mom said quietly.

"So I won't even be alone for a full day. Mom, if you're going to be doing this job thing, you're going to have to trust me, at least a little." I said frankly.

Mom considered for a moment, then said, "I suppose you are growing up and don't need me to be watching over you every second."

I smiled at her and said, "It's nice to know that you care and I do still need you. But I can get by on my own for a little while, so you can do the stuff you need to do."

Mom got up from her chair and walked to me.

I stood so she could give me a hug.

"I don't know what your father and I did that was so right to get such a good kid, but I'm really proud of you." Mom said happily.

I returned the hug and felt a little relief knowing that I wasn't going to have to leave Enoch tomorrow.

* * * * *

"So what are you going to do, now that you've had a good nap? Are you going to spend the night unpacking?" Mom asked curiously.

"Yeah. At least I'll get started. I don't have that much stuff, but I want to take the time to get everything put up just where I want it." I said consideringly.

"Well, your room looks very nice. Walking in there is like stepping back in time." She said with a smile.

"Yeah. That's what I like about it. I think it's really comfortable." I said quietly.

"Enjoy your unpacking. I'm going to be fretting over every detail of what I'm going to be doing tomorrow. If I can pull this off, I may be able to get us on our feet a lot sooner than I had planned." Mom said happily.

"I didn't ask before, what kind of job is it?" I asked curiously.

"Basically, I'd be the assistant to the project manager for the entire four corners region. Even though the job would be a lot of hard work in the beginning, I would eventually be in line for the project manager's position. It's really a dream job." Mom said frankly.

"Four corners?" I asked cautiously.

"Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona." Mom said seriously.

"Where would we live?" I asked cautiously.

"The regional office is located in Santa Fe, New Mexico." Mom said hesitantly, watching closely for my reaction.

I stared at her for a moment, then said, "But I was just starting to like it here."

"I know honey. But don't worry about it yet. There are two other people going for the same job that I am and they probably have a list of credentials as long as your arm. And this is my first interview in almost twenty years. There's a good chance that by this time next month you'll be so used to this whole process that you won't think twice about it." Mom said reassuringly.

I nodded slowly, even though I heard the words, I still felt like she was trying to uproot me again, just as soon as I found a place where I wanted to be.

* * * * *

I walked into my bedroom and felt peace wash over me.

Enoch was standing by the mirror looking at it closely.

"How's it going?" I asked quietly.

He gestured to the mirror and walked across the room to join him.

I wanted to see what it looked like in my world.

It was just like he had said in our shared dream. It looked like there was a slight flaw in the glass, like a faint ripple.

"My mom is going to be leaving tomorrow to go to Santa Fe for a job interview." I said distantly.

Enoch looked at me with question and concern.

"Don't worry about it E. She says that she probably won't get it, but she has to go just in case." I said with assurance.

Enoch had a surprised expression on his face, then he broke into a fond smile.

I played my words back through my mind and realized what I had called him.

"I hope you don't mind that I called you E. I didn't even think about it." I said shyly.

Enoch moved close to me and I could see the love in his eyes.

I automatically opened my arms to him and felt him as he pressed into my chest.

"I'm glad I can see you now. It makes this a lot better." I whispered as I moved in to give him a light kiss.

The kiss was brief, but very nice.

"I need to finish unpacking my stuff. You can help me if you want." I said quietly.

Enoch pulled away and looked at me with question.

"I don't have that much stuff, but I'd like it if you could tell me where you think things should go. It'll make it more like *our* room if you'll help me decide.

Enoch smiled and nodded happily.

"Good. Thanks E." I said as I moved to the foot of the bed and picked up the box of my stuff that I'd left laying there the night before.

"How about this?" I asked as I pulled my one and only trophy out of the box.

Enoch looked at me curiously, then pointed at the trophy, then back at me with question.

I smiled and said, "A couple years ago my parents sent me to summer camp. While I was there I learned how to use a bow and arrow. In the last week of camp we had competitions and I won the archery contest."

Enoch smiled at me proudly, then bent down to look at the trophy more closely.

"I think this would look good on top of the closet thing over there." I said as I pointed.

Enoch seemed to consider for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

I walked across the room and placed my trophy in the center on top of the tall cabinet.

I stepped back to look at it and asked, "What do you think?"

Enoch walked to my side, then looked at the trophy consideringly.

He walked to the cabinet and reached up.

I watched as his insubstantial hand pressed against the trophy and it very slowly started to move.

After a moment, Enoch stepped back beside me again and looked at the trophy again.

I followed his gaze and noticed that now it really looked centered.

"Yeah, now it's perfect." I said with a smile.

* * * * *

It went on like that through the rest of my box of mementos and junk.

With both of us deciding on every single thing that was taken out of the box, it took a lot longer than it probably should have, but it was fun.

A knock on the door interrupted our decision on where I should put a picture of Mom and Dad and me.

I opened the door and stood aside, silently inviting Mom to come into my room.

Her eyes were immediately drawn to the oil lamp which was the only light in the room.

She felt beside the door absently, then turned to look when she didn't automatically encounter a light switch.

"There's no electricity in here." I said timidly.

She looked at me with surprise, but didn't comment.

"Are you all ready to fly out in the morning?" I asked curiously.

"I think so. I just wanted to let you know that I talked to your grandfather and let him know that you'll be staying here by yourself tomorrow." She said as she looked around my room curiously.

"I hope he wasn't upset because I didn't want to stay at their house." I said quietly.

"No. I explained that you wanted to get settled in and he understood completely. But mom insisted that you come over for dinner tomorrow night. I doubt that there's any way you're going to be able to get out of it." Mom said with an apologetic tone.

"That's fine. I don't mind going over and visiting for a while, I just didn't want to spend the whole day over there." I said with assurance.

Mom smiled and said, "Good. Then you should probably expect Dad to be over here about six tomorrow night to pick you up."

"Okay. I'll be ready." I said as I studied her expression, trying to understand what she wasn't saying.

I guess Mom noticed, because she looked away from me for a moment before saying, "Joe Bob called me and told me some of what you two talked about."

"Did he say how his talk with Jim Bob went?" I asked curiously.

"He said that he told his kids about you being gay. Beau thought it was really cool but the other two didn't really give any reaction." Mom said quietly.

"And..." I said, prompting her to get to whatever was bothering her.

"Well, I know you probably wanted to be alone tomorrow, but Joe Bob is really worried about Jim Bob and we got to talking about it and I... kind of... said it would be okay if they came over to spend the day with you." Mom said reluctantly.

I chuckled before saying, "Joe Bob already asked me about that and I said that I wouldn't mind if they came over. Beau is great and I think Jim Bob is probably okay, he's just so quiet it's hard to tell. I don't mind them coming over."

"There's one more thing." Mom said reluctantly.

I looked at her with question.

"Well, I trust you. I really do. But I don't want three boys left unsupervised all day..." Mom trailed off.

"Who's going to watch us?" I asked hesitantly, not liking any of the answers I could come up with.

"Joe Bob Jr." Mom said quietly.

I thought about the answer for a moment and considered, finally I said, "I guess I can see why you wouldn't want us to be here alone. I don't know Joe Bob Jr., but I like his dad and his brothers so he's probably okay."

"Have I mentioned what a good kid you are?" Mom asked as she pulled me into a hug.

"You might have once or twice." I said with a smile.

"I'd better get to bed now. I don't want to go into the interview with bags under my eyes." Mom said as she released me from the hug.

"I hope everything goes well in your interview." I said as she walked to the door.

"Thanks honey. I'll call your grandfather and let him know how it went as soon as I'm finished." She said, then slipped out the door.

* * * * *

I turned to find Enoch staring at the door with a sad look in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" I asked him quietly.

His only response was to slowly close his eyes and slightly shake his head.

I looked around the room and decided that I had done enough unpacking for one day.

"How about we get into bed so you can tell me about it?" I asked quietly.

Enoch looked at me for a moment with a speculative look in his eyes, then hesitantly nodded.

I quickly skinned out of my clothes down to my underwear, then walked over to the oil lamp and blew it out.

When I turned to face the bed, I was surprised to see Enoch's glowing body reclined, looking at me with interest.

"Wow, I can see you even better in the dark." I said as I slowly got into the bed beside Enoch.

His gentle smile sent a tingle of happiness through me.

"I want to tell you this in the real world so neither of us can ever say it's a dream..." I said as I looked into his creamy green eyes.

Enoch waited, devoting his full attention to me.

"I love you E. This thing with my mom and moving to Texas and everything else would be making me crazy if you weren't here. Loving you is the only important thing right now, the rest is just background noise to me." I said softly.

Enoch smiled and brought his insubstantial hand up to caress my cheek. I closed my eyes and soaked in the tingling sensation of his ghostly touch. In a voice that was little more than a whisper I heard him say, "I love you too Mark."

My eyes snapped open and I looked at him with wonder. He gave me a shy smile and whispered, "Sleep with me." I nodded, then lay back to let sleep take me.

* * * * *

As soon as I appeared in our dream place, I felt Enoch's arms come around me and hug me tightly.

"I wish we could stay like this. I miss you so much when I have to leave." I said as I held him close.

"I too wish we could remain together. But you exist in the real world and must attend to your real world obligations." Enoch said quietly.

"Will you tell me about what was bothering you earlier, you know, when my mom was here?" I asked quietly.

There was a long moment of silence, then he quietly said, "I was just reminded of my own mother. I miss her."

I nodded as I thought about what little I knew of his mother.

She had died three days before Enoch arrived in Texas.

He didn't get a chance to say goodbye.

Then I remembered something that Allie had said and asked, "Do you think it would make you feel better to visit her grave?"

He pulled back and looked at me with surprise.

"I just thought... You haven't seen it for a while and maybe..." I trailed off quietly.

Finally I continued in a whisper, "...it might help."

Enoch seemed to be considering the idea, then quietly said, "There is no way for me to do that. If I were to venture out into the darkness to find her, I might not be able to find my way back here."

"I thought I could find a way to take you. Allie said something about a family graveyard and I figured that that's where it would be." I said carefully.

"Thank you Mark. I would like that." Enoch said quietly.

I moved in and gave Enoch a gentle kiss. The kiss didn't have anything to do with passion, it was about comfort and a desire to share the pain he was feeling.

When the kiss broke between us Enoch whispered, "Thank you."

"I love you E. Let's go to sleep." I said quietly.

Enoch kissed me gently on the cheek, then everything seemed to fade into nothingness.

Chapter 6: For Family

I awoke to a wonderful feeling of ultimate peace.

Before I even opened my eyes, I was aware of the presence of Enoch at my side.

Slowly I opened my eyes and was surprised by what I saw.

The hazy ill defined form of Enoch from last night was replaced by the beautiful, ethereal creature beside me.

Although he was still transparent, I could see details this morning that were lost in the haze last night.

"I can see you a lot better today." I whispered.

Enoch's contemplative expression turned to one of joy as his jade eyes looked into mine.

I wanted to say more, but the words caught in my throat at his absolute beauty.

Hesitantly, I reached up my hand and touched his hair.

Enoch's eyes went wide as he obviously felt my touch.

"I felt you. I didn't even have to try." Enoch said in wonder.

His voice sounded like a whisper, like it was a sound that came from far off in the distance. But I could hear it clearly and nodded that I understood.

"Did you have a good sleep?" I asked gently as I continued to stroke his hair.

"I don't sleep." Enoch said with regret.

"You don't?" I asked curiously.

"No. Not once since I have been... in this place." Enoch said with a note of pain in his voice.

To exist for a hundred years without the ability to sleep or dream, never knowing a moment of true rest... I couldn't do it. I would go insane.

"So what do you do all night?" I asked as I watched his expression carefully.

Enoch looked away for a moment, then distantly said, "Night and day are the same in the endless void where I am. Before your arrival I would just sit

and stare at the nothingness. It's the closest I can come to sleep."

"You said that's what you did before I arrived. What do you do now?" I asked quietly.

"I watch you." Enoch said with a shy smile.

I returned his smile and a little bit of his shyness seemed to fall away.

Those simple words, said so shyly, made me fall in love with Enoch all over again.

Regardless of the seemingly endless existence he's endured, he's content to sit up all night just watching me sleep.

I've never felt so beautiful... so loved.

Enoch raised his hand and quietly began to ask, "May I..."

But before he could complete his request, he seemed to think better of it and started to move his hand away.

"Yes." I whispered before he could withdraw his hand completely.

Enoch froze in mid motion and looked at me with question.

"You may." I said as I looked deeply into his beautiful jade green eyes.

Enoch broke into a timid smile, then his hand started moving toward me again.

I don't know what he was asking permission to do, but I couldn't imagine anything that Enoch could ask of me at that moment that I would hesitate to give him.

Enoch's hand moved to the side of my face and I felt the gentlest touch, the most ethereal and insubstantial of sensations as he brushed his fingertips against my cheek.

I held still and smiled at the action.

Seeming to be encouraged by my willingness to go along with him, Enoch moved his hand farther back so he was cradling my head, then moved in to give me a kiss.

The kisses we had shared up to now had been wonderful and beautiful, but there was still something about the experience that seemed unreal.

I don't know if it was the absence of body heat or maybe the lack of any taste or smell when our mouths joined that made our kisses seem more dream than reality.

But the sensation of his lips brushing against mine wasn't anything less than real.

His lips were slightly salty and I could detect the faintest hint of wood smoke coming from him as his mouth pressed to mine.

Without thought, I moved my arms around him and found that his transparent body seemed to have enough substance that I could really hug him.

My body began to respond as, for the first time since I had met Enoch, he seemed completely real.

All my senses were telling me that he was real and my instincts knew what I wanted to do next.

Enoch broke the kiss and backed away from me slightly to look into my eyes.

"You have done something to me. You've changed me." Enoch said in his whispery voice.

"I have?" I asked as I looked at him with wonder.

Enoch slowly nodded.

"How have you changed?" I asked slowly.

I wasn't sure that I really wanted to know, especially since I couldn't tell from Enoch's expression if he was happy with the changes.

"It is like you are drawing me out of my unreal world. It is as though, by your very will, you are summoning me back into physical being." Enoch said seriously.

"It's not just you E." I said frankly.

Enoch smiled at the use of my pet name for him.

"When I was over at my grandparent's house yesterday, I was able to see Uncle George. He's Allie's husband." I said seriously.

Enoch looked at me with slight confusion.

"He's dead." I said as I realized that I hadn't mentioned that before.

"So you were able to see a disembodied spirit?" Enoch asked with wonder.

"Not the same way I can see you. He was just kind of a blur... I'm not sure how to describe what he looked like but I could tell where he was in the room, just like when we first met." I said in a considering voice.

Enoch nodded in thought for a moment, then moved away from me.

"Where are you going?" I asked, not wanting him to leave, but also not feeling that I had any right to ask him to stay.

"I just want to show you something." Enoch said as he moved to the foot of the bed.

I felt myself smile, and I'm sure the expression on my face must have revealed what I wanted him to show me.

A moment later Enoch sat up with a look of triumph as he presented my flute case to me.

It took a few seconds for me to realize the significance of what I was seeing.

Before it had taken a great deal of concentration and effort for Enoch to barely move something in the real world, but here he was, sitting right in front of me, holding my flute case in his transparent hands.

"E, that's wonderful." I said in amazement.

Enoch broke into a glorious smile at my words.

Once again I felt so loved.

Cherished.

I had heard the word before, but I never really thought about the meaning.

I know my mom and dad love me. Even in the darkest days of their divorce, I never doubted that for an instant.

But at no time in my life have I ever felt absolutely cherished.

Not even close.

"Will you play something for me?" Enoch asked hopefully as he held the flute case out to me.

"Sure. I'd love to." I said as I accepted the case.

Enoch moved back up the bed to my side and watched as I assembled my flute.

"Is there anything special you'd like to hear? I doubt that I'd know too many of the same songs that you do, but if I've heard it before I can probably fake it." I said, then worked all the valves to be sure that they wouldn't stick.

"The song you played before, the somber one. Would you play that?" Enoch asked hopefully.

"Sure. It's called '10,000 Promises' and it's one of my favorites too." I said, then brought the flute to my lips.

Enoch watched intently as I began to play the slow lilting melody.

As I moved into the chorus I began to lose myself in the melancholy mood of the music.

* * * * *

I heard a gentle knocking on my bedroom door which caused me to stop.

"Yes?" I said cautiously.

Mom slowly opened the door and looked at me with a gentle smile.

"I'm glad you're up. I was hoping I'd get to see you before I left." Mom said quietly.

"When do you have to go?" I asked curiously.

"In just a few minutes. I was just making sure I didn't leave anything important behind when I heard you playing... It was beautiful." Mom finished proudly.

"Thanks. Do you know when you'll be back?" I asked curiously.

"It will probably be late tonight. Don't bother waiting up for me, I'm sure I'll want to go right to bed when I get in. I can tell you all about how things went in the morning." Mom said seriously.

"OK. But if you have some really good news to share, I won't mind if you wake me up." I said as I looked her in the eyes.

"Thanks. I'll remember that." Mom said with a smile.

By the tone of her words, I could tell that she really appreciated the offer.

After a glance at her watch, she quickly said, "I've got to go. I don't want to be late."

She leaned down and pulled me into a firm hug as she said, "I love you. I hope you and your cousins have a good day today."

"I love you too Mom. Good luck." I said as I returned the hug.

Mom was still smiling as she hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Your mother seems very nice." Enoch said as he stared at the door.

"Yeah. She's alright." I said as I rested back on the bed.

After a long silent moment, I noticed that Enoch was still staring at the door.

"You're still missing your mom, aren't you." I asked quietly.

Enoch absently nodded.

"Well, when my cousins get here, I'll ask them if they know where the family graveyard is. I have a feeling that they wouldn't mind showing it to me." I said as I thought about the new members of my family.

Enoch finally turned his gaze away from the door and smiled at me gently. He was so beautiful.

I didn't have any words to express just how deeply I was falling in love. Words would only get in the way.

While continuing to look him in the eyes, I raised my flute to my lips and began to play with every bit of emotion that I was feeling.

* * * * *

I guess I lost all track of time as I was sitting in my bed, playing my flute for Enoch.

The sound of a firm knock on the front door broke the spell that we were under.

"That must be my cousins." I said as I hopped out of the bed and grabbed one of the pairs of short pants that I'd bought the day before.

"I will miss you." Enoch said with a pained look in his eyes.

"Why don't you come with me?" I asked as I quickly pulled on a tee shirt.

"I may become lost in the darkness." Enoch said with regret.

"I won't let you get lost. Just stick with me and you'll be fine. And if something happens that we do get separated, I'll go back and find you." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

Enoch seemed to be warring within himself if he should take the chance and venture out into the world that he hadn't visited for so many years.

Finally he seemed to come to a decision and nodded hesitantly.

"I love you E. There's no way I'm going to lose you now." I said firmly, then waited, to emphasize the point.

Enoch smiled and quietly said, "I love you too, Mark."

"Cool. Let's go, I want you to meet my cousins. They're really great." I said as I turned toward the door.

"If they are your family, I am certain that I will like them." Enoch said as he joined me by the door.

"You wouldn't say that if you met my Aunt Prissy." I said with a smile, then walked out into the hallway, making sure that Enoch was still at my side.

* * * * *

After a few stops and starts on the stairs, which I assume that he couldn't see, we finally started moving at a more normal pace.

"Beau! Get back out here. This is Mark's house now. It ain't right to walk in without being invited!" A voice said harshly.

"But maybe he's still asleep and didn't hear us knocking." I heard Beau say defensively, then in a scream he continued, "MARK! WE'RE HERE!"

I glanced at Enoch and could tell from his reaction that he had also heard.

"I'm right here. Come on in guys." I said as I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and waited for Enoch to catch up to me.

"Hi Mark. I'm sorry I walked into your house without being invited, but I didn't know if you heard us knock." Beau said timidly.

"That's fine Beau, I heard you but I had to put on some clothes before I came down." I said with a smile at the boy, hoping to put him at ease.

A movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention and I noticed Jim Bob standing just inside the front door with a shy expression on his face... and he seemed to be blushing.

Before I could give it any thought, the front door opened to reveal someone who I hadn't met before.

This boy was a complete stranger, but I knew who he was without a doubt.

"You must be Joe Bob Junior. I'm Mark, your cousin." I said as I looked over this very handsome guy.

Beau and Jim Bob both had some of their dad's features, but they must have picked up some of their mom's too.

Simply put, Joe Bob Junior was the spitting image of his father.

"Yup. You can call me Junior if you want." Joe Bob said casually.

"He always says that, but no one never calls him Junior unless Pa's around." Beau said quickly.

Joe Bob gave a slow, casual nod of agreement which said louder than words that he really didn't care either way.

"You ain't had breakfast yet, have ya?" Joe Bob asked in his slow, Texas drawl.

"No, I just woke up." I said with a smile, then realized that it was a little bit strange that after knowing Joe Bob for only a few seconds, I automatically liked him.

"Then me and Beau are gonna make us all some breakfast." Joe Bob said simply, then looked down at Beau and said, "Git on out to tha car and start haulin' in the groceries while I get the stove goin'."

"I can help if you want." I offered quickly, feeling a little funny about a guest coming over to my house and having to cook for himself.

"Nah. You and Jim Bob got some talkin' ta do. Y'all best get to it." Joe Bob said seriously, then started walking toward the kitchen.

If anyone else I could imagine had come to my house and done the same thing, I probably would have thought they were being pushy and rude. But it wasn't like Joe Bob was ordering me around, he was just stating the fact that these are the things that need to be done.

I glanced at Enoch and noticed his gaze directed across the room.

When I followed it, I saw that Jim Bob was looking back at me with an expression of complete mortification as he realized the real reason they were visiting today.

Rather than pretend that I didn't know what Joe Bob was talking about, I figured that it would be best to just face it head on and see what happens.

"Let's go into the living room and sit down." I said as I gestured toward the living room door.

Jim Bob stood staring at me for a minute longer, then my words finally seemed to register.

Without a word, he quickly turned and walked into the living room, reminding me of a rabbit darting into his burrow as a hawk was swooping down for the kill.

I glanced at my side and from Enoch's expression, it appeared that he was uncomfortable and uncertain of what he should do.

"Love you." I whispered.

Enoch looked me in the eyes for a moment, then his expression relaxed as he said, "I love you too Mark."

* * * * *

As I walked into the living room, I noticed that Jim Bob hadn't sat down yet.

"Come on, let's get comfortable." I said as I gestured toward the furniture in the middle of the room.

I suppose what I was really saying was, 'let's sit down' because it looked like the only thing that would make Jim Bob comfortable at this point would have to be prescribed by a doctor.

"I'm guessing you've figured out what we're supposed to talk about." I said as I tried to will Jim Bob to meet my eyes.

The most he would give me was an occasional glance as his eyes darted around the room.

"I guess." He finally mumbled.

'Great!' I thought sarcastically, 'This is going to be like pulling teeth.'

I thought about the upcoming game of twenty questions that we were going to have to go through just to get to the point where he would admit that something was wrong.

Why was I doing this again?

What business was it of mine?

But before I could talk myself out of trying to help, I noticed Jim Bob's expression.

No matter what his problem was, he was suffering. It would be wrong for me to just leave him alone and hope that it all works out.

"I guess your dad already told you that I'm gay." I said in prelude.

Jim Bob's eyes went wide as he finally looked at me, and seemed to pale a little.

"I think the reason that he wants us to talk is so you can have someone to talk to who has faced something big and got past it. Because of the stuff that I've already dealt with, maybe I can help you with whatever is bothering you." I said carefully.

"But I'm not... nothin's bothering me." Jim Bob stammered.

From the way he was sitting on the couch, he looked like he was trying to tie himself into a knot.

I'm no expert on body language, but I'm pretty sure that's not how an unbothered person chooses to sit comfortably.

"Jim Bob, something is really eating you up. I can see it, your dad can see it, your brothers can see it. Whatever it is, probably isn't as bad as you think it is. But how long can you keep going like this?" I asked with concern.

Jim Bob was staring at me wide eyed. You know, the classic 'deer in the headlights' look.

I played back my last few words to try and understand which thing had panicked him.

'Your dad can see it'... yeah, that's probably it.

"You have no reason to trust me or tell me a single thing. I'm a stranger to you. But if you look at it another way, that's actually a good thing. I don't have any secret agenda, I'm not going to run off and tell about what you said to me because I don't know anyone here. I'm completely outside everything that's going on, so I can give you an unbiased point of view." I said frankly.

From the blank look on Jim Bob's face, I'm not entirely sure that he got what I was saying.

Hell, I'm not entirely sure he didn't slip into a coma back when I said the word 'gay'.

There was a firm knock on the living room door, then a moment later Joe Bob poked his head just inside.

"Y'all come on. Breakfast is on tha table."

"We'll be right there." I said as I stood.

Jim Bob's eyes shifted toward me slowly, as if he were only half aware of what his brother had said.

"We can talk some more later. We've got all day." I said with a quick smile, then glanced to see that Enoch was ready to go.

As I had hoped, Enoch was also standing, and started walking just a step behind me.

* * * * *

"You made this?" I asked with surprise at the variety of delicious looking foods on the table.

"Yup. Me and Beau did." Joe Bob said proudly.

"Joe Bob works at McDonald's, so he knows how to make all kinds of really good food." Beau said with pride for his brother.

"Oh yeah. I heard that you got promoted. Congratulations." I said as I filled my plate.

"Thanks. Ain't much to it. I just go in and do my job." Joe Bob said dismissively.

I got the feeling that, from Joe Bob's point of view, it was just that simple.

Anyone else would call it being responsible, mature and having a good strong work ethic. Joe Bob obviously doesn't think about it at all, it's just part of his nature. And from what little I've seen of his dad, I'm sure it comes from being taught those values from a young age.

And I doubt that Joe Bob Senior realizes just how much he's taught his son by example... And I guess by the same token, neither does Aunt Prissy.

"So did Jim Bob tell you what's wrong with him?" Beau asked bluntly.

"Beau! You ain't supposed to ask about that. Remember what Pa said?" Joe Bob asked firmly.

I'm sure Joe Bob was just asking because he wanted Beau to remember it. But Beau did as all little brothers tend to do.

"Whatever's wrong ain't our business and we ain't ta ask about it. Just as long as Jim Bob gits ta feelin' better, that's all that's important." Beau said, obviously repeating his dad's words from memory.

I glanced at Jim Bob and saw that he looked to be about two seconds from running out of the room.

Before I could think of anything to say to try and diffuse the situation, Beau said, "Mark, Pa said that you're gay. Is that right?"

"Beau. Hush now. It ain't right to be askin' about that. You need to be workin on that food that's there in front of you." Joe Bob said sternly.

"It's okay." I said quickly, not wanting Beau or Jim Bob to get the feeling that I was ashamed of being gay.

I turned to Joe Bob and said, "I mean, it's something that's kind of personal and I don't want to talk about it all the time. But if Beau has some questions, I wouldn't mind answering them."

"It don't seem right. I mean, Beau is just a young'un." Joe Bob said seriously.

"If he's got questions, it's best for him to get the answers from someone who knows what he's talking about." I said frankly.

"Yeah. It's best if he don't learn about that stuff the way I did." Joe Bob said distantly.

Okay. I know it's none of my business, but before I could tell myself that, I went ahead and asked, "How did you learn about it?"

Joe Bob looked at me with surprise at the question, and from his expression, I'm pretty sure he wasn't going to give me an honest answer.

"I think it'll be a lot of help to your brothers if they can learn about these things from us instead of having to go out and find out the hard way." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

Joe Bob looked away for a moment and seemed to be struggling with the decision, finally he said, "Back when I was just a little bit older than Beau, I heard about some stuff from the guys I hung around with at school. I asked my Pa about it and he sat me down and told me about the birds and the bees."

"What does birds and bees have to do with it?" Beau asked quickly.

I smiled at the question and said, "Nothing, that's just another way of saying 'the facts about sex'."

"Well, the stuff that Pa told me didn't have nothin' to do with what, um... guys do together." Joe Bob said self consciously.

"Yeah. I think a lot of parents leave that part out." I said with sympathy.

"So me and... a friend. We tried some stuff." Joe Bob said as his voice became so soft that I could barely hear him.

"What kind of stuff?" Beau asked curiously, not seeming to notice his brother's embarrassment at all.

"Maybe we should save that part of the talk till you're a little bit older." Joe Bob said to Beau, then looked at me to see if I was going to disagree.

I nodded that I thought he was right, then said to Beau, "Now that you know your brother has tried out some things, you can ask him if you ever need to know about it. And since I'm living here now, you can come to me too and I'll do whatever I can to help you."

Beau wasn't happy being denied the information he wanted, but finally he grudgingly accepted it.

"Anyway, me and my friend, we kinda messed around and... well. It felt pretty good." Joe Bob said quietly.

"So are you gay?" Beau asked curiously. His tone didn't hold any accusation or hope, just interest.

"No. When I got a little bit older, I started noticing girls and... well, doing stuff with guys just wasn't fun anymore." Joe Bob said introspectively.

I nodded that I understood what he was saying and said, "From what I've heard, that's pretty normal. Sometimes guys will mess around together and figure out how the equipment works, then when they get older, they get interested in girls."

Joe Bob looked at me with surprise for a moment, then a slight look of relief seem to come into his eyes.

He was worried.

I guess Joe Bob wasn't secure enough in his sexuality to know 'for sure' that he was straight and having me tell him that the things he had done were perfectly normal helped to ease his mind.

"So are you going to do that? Get interested in girls?" Beau asked as he looked at me curiously.

"No. I don't think so. I've known I'm gay for a couple years now. I did a little bit of the playing around like Joe Bob did, but when my friends were

starting to notice girls, I was still noticing my friends." I said as I remembered those dark, lonely days.

"But you still could. I mean, maybe it just hasn't happened yet." Beau said seriously.

I smiled at him and said, "There's another difference between the way I feel and the way Joe Bob does."

All eyes at the table were fixed on me, even Enoch's.

"When I started messing around with guys, it was all about doing things that feel good and playing around... and maybe about doing something 'naughty'." I finished with a smile.

"But later, I realized that what I really wanted was something more. I wanted kissing, hugging, holding... I wanted love. It's hard to explain, but I know within myself that I want that love from a guy. Girls don't make me feel anything like that." I said distantly.

"I didn't think of that." Joe Bob said thoughtfully.

"Does your mom know?" Beau asked curiously.

"Yeah. I told my parents a couple years ago." I said with a smile at the younger boy.

"Were they mad at you?" Beau asked cautiously.

"No. They were just fine with it. My mom was great, in fact. My dad didn't get angry or anything, but he seemed like he didn't want to talk about it. I thought maybe he was disappointed in me, but I guess he was having his own problems then and... well, it doesn't matter. I know he loves me and he doesn't have a problem with me being gay."

"If y'all are finished with your breakfast, we can do the dishes and give y'all another chance to talk." Joe Bob said as he stood.

I looked down at my plate and was surprised to see that I had eaten every bite.

I wonder if it was good...

...It looked good.

"Why don't Jim Bob and I do the dishes. You cooked, so it's only right." I said as I also stood.

"You sure?" Joe Bob asked cautiously.

"Yeah." I said with a smile at Joe Bob, then looked at Jim Bob and asked, "That okay with you?"

Jim Bob nodded without looking up, then started gathering dishes.

Before turning to leave, I glanced at my side and saw that Enoch was only an arm's length away.

* * * * *

"Jim Bob." I said quietly when we were finally both in the kitchen.

After a moment, he reluctantly looked me in the eyes.

"A lot of people love you and are worried about you. I think I've said everything that I can to let you know that you can talk to me. So this is the last I'm going to say about it. If you can't talk to me, please just find someone to talk to who can give you some good advice." I said, then turned away from him as I opened the dishwasher.

After putting the glasses into the top of the dishwasher, I quietly said, "Would you scrape off the plates and hand them to me?"

Jim Bob blinked a few times, then looked me in the eyes as he asked, "If I tell you something, would you promise not to tell anyone?"

"Yeah. I promise." I said as I turned away from the dishwasher and devoted my full attention to Jim Bob.

"Well, I... Um, I'm gay." Jim Bob stammered in a whisper.

"I know how hard it is to say that for the first time. It's okay." I said gently.

Jim Bob nodded absently and I suddenly got the sense that he wasn't finished.

I waited for him to continue, but he seemed to be stuck.

"It's okay. Whatever it is, I promise never to tell anyone." I said quietly.

"Okay... well. You know the stuff Joe Bob said about messing around?" Jim Bob said with a tremble in his voice.

"Yeah. It's perfectly natural. I think most guys end up doing something like that." I said in a soothing voice.

"Well, I, um... I've been seeing this guy for a couple years... and he says that he loves me." Jim Bob mumbled.

Okay. That one threw me for a loop.

Timid little Jim Bob has had a lover for over 2 years!

As quiet and mousy as he is, I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that he was freaking out about touching another boy's nipple.

I never would have guessed that he was seeing anyone long term, and that they had already used the 'L' word.

"Do you love him?" I asked hesitantly.

He still seemed to be holding something back and whatever it was must be something pretty bad to have caused him to withdraw from his family.

"Yeah." Jim Bob said as tears started welling up in his eyes.

"Then I'm happy for you." I said, trying to sound assuring.

"He's... He's older than me." Jim Bob choked out as the tears started to fall.

WARNING! WILL ROBINSON! WARNING!

I could almost see that stupid robot flailing his arms.

"How much older?" I asked cautiously.

"Fifteen years." Jim Bob whispered as his gaze fell to the floor.

To hell with it!

I don't care how timid or skittish Jim Bob is. The boy needed a hug and he was going to get one!

I pulled Jim Bob into my arms and hugged him as tightly as I possibly could.

"You... you're not going to tell, are you?" Jim Bob asked in a trembling voice between sobs.

I clutched him a little tighter as I whispered, "I promised you that I wouldn't and I'm going to keep my promise. I swear that I'll never tell."

I guess that was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back because as soon as the words left my mouth, Jim Bob started to cry for real.

As tears started to fill my own eyes, I saw that Enoch had moved where I could see him.

"We're going to help him, aren't we?" Enoch asked as he looked at Jim Bob with sympathy.

Even though I had no idea what I could do considering that I was in a new place where I didn't know anyone, I nonetheless nodded to Enoch and

confirmed the commitment to him and to myself.

Some how, some way. I would help Jim Bob.

Chapter 7: Pilgrimage

"How're y'all doin in here?" Joe Bob asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Just about finished." I said as I slowly released Jim Bob from the hug.

Joe Bob pretended not to notice his brother's emotional state and slowly said, "Me an Beau was just tryin to figure out what we was wantin to do today. You got any ideas?"

I smiled at Joe Bob. Handsome. Gentle. Thoughtful. It's amazing how much I could come to like someone who I only just met.

"I wanna go outside and do somethin' before it gets too hot." Beau said from the doorway.

That sounded like the perfect opening for what Enoch and I were wanting to do, and Jim Bob would probably appreciate a diversion.

"Last night Allie mentioned something about a family graveyard. Is there any way we could look at that?" I asked with a glance at Enoch.

"I never thought of that! Can we?" Beau asked his brother with excitement.

Joe Bob considered for a moment, then looked at me and slowly said, "You'll probably be wantin' to put on some long pants. There's cactus and grass burrs and the like out back."

"Will jeans be okay?" I asked, then glanced at Jim Bob to see how he was doing.

I couldn't tell for sure since I hadn't known him that long, but I somehow got the sense that what he was feeling right now was relief. Maybe he was realizing that no big horrible thing happened because he revealed his deep dark secret. Like I said, I can't be sure, but I think I was catching a glimpse of what Jim Bob looked like when he wasn't buried under tons of anxiety.

"Yeah. And boots if you got 'em." Joe Bob said seriously.

I guess it was his drawl that made me automatically think of cowboy boots, which I didn't have. But before I could say as much, I remembered my hiking boots from back home. They were kind of old and worn, but probably good enough.

"Just give me a minute to change and I'll be ready to go." I said, then glanced to see if Enoch was ready to go with me.

"Can I see your room?" Beau asked hopefully.

It would have been nice to steal a moment alone with Enoch, but there was no way I could deny Beau's request. I'm a sucker for puppy eyes.

"Sure, come on." I said as I started walking toward the kitchen door.

* * * * *

I deliberately walked a little slower than usual so that Enoch could keep up with me.

I can only imagine what it must be like to walk in complete darkness and have to place your trust in someone else to guide you.

Beau didn't seem to be a big fan of walking slowly. He would run ahead of us, wait for us to catch up to him, then run a little further ahead.

As we were about halfway up the stairs, I glanced at Enoch to see how he was doing.

I was worried that he might be frustrated or feeling lost. The expression on his face immediately put me at ease.

Enoch was watching Beau with amusement. Even though I could tell that he was having some difficulty with the stairs, I could see that watching Beau's antics was keeping his mind diverted from the frustrating task.

"Which one is yours?" Beau asked impatiently from the top of the stairs.

"Just wait a minute and I'll show you." I said gently.

I don't know if it was his innocence or his uninhibited nature. But something about Beau called out to me and made me absolutely love him. Then the thought occurred to me, I wonder if Jim Bob was ever this happy and carefree?

By the time we reached the top of the stairs, Beau had already run up and down the hall two times. I suppose he was trying to find some kind of a clue that would tell him which room was mine.

"It's right here." I said as I walked to the door.

"Nuh uh!" Beau said as he froze in place.

"Yuh huh." I said with a grin as I opened the door.

"Daddy always said we ain't never s'posed to go in'ta that room. He said it was haunted. Grandpa said it too!" Beau said firmly.

I glanced at Enoch with a smile, then turned to Beau and said, "Well, you can stay out here and wait for me to change, if you want."

Beau seemed to be conflicted for a moment, then he quickly said, "I wanna see!"

I couldn't restrain my chuckle, and said, "Then come on in."

* * * * *

"I like him." Enoch said in a whisper of a voice as we entered the room.

I didn't want to take the chance of answering aloud while Beau was so close, so I nodded to him that I agreed.

"Wow! Everything in here is really old!" Beau said in wonder.

"Not everything. I brought some of my own stuff with me." I said as I walked to the cabinet where my hanging clothes were kept.

"You got toys!" Beau said with delight as he spotted the toy soldiers.

"Hold on." I said quickly.

Beau stopped and looked at me with question.

"Those are very old and very delicate. You can look at them if you want, but I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't touch them." I said carefully.

"Are they worth a lot of money?" Beau asked as he slowly walked toward the small formation of soldiers.

"I don't know, but it doesn't matter because I'd never sell them." I said as I took the jeans that I wanted off the hanger.

"Why not?" Beau asked as he turned to look at me curiously.

I thought about the question as I sat on the edge of my bed and took off my trainers.

"Okay. Let me ask you to imagine something." I said in prelude.

Beau seemed to be intrigued.

"Imagine that Joe Bob wanted to make you a present." I said carefully.

"What kind of present?" Beau asked, delighted by the idea.

"Some toy soldiers." I said simply as I stood and pulled down my short pants.

Beau glanced at my underwear for an instant, then looked at me curiously.

"Okay. Now imagine that Joe Bob worked for weeks and weeks to make those soldiers for you, carving them and painting them, all just for you." I said as I stepped into my jeans.

"Okay." Beau said slowly as he was trying to imagine the scene.

"Once you had those soldiers that your brother made for you, just because he loved you, how do you think you would treat them?" I asked while fastening my pants.

After a moment to consider, Beau said, "I guess I'd take real good care of them so they wouldn't get banged up and stuff. That way I could have them for a long time."

I smiled at the answer, then said, "That's why not."

Beau gave me such a confused look that I couldn't help but laugh.

As I started to pull on my hiking boots, I said, "Those toy soldiers were a gift, made with love. They're special and should be protected and preserved."

"Did your dad make them for you?" Beau asked as he turned to look at the soldiers again.

"No. They weren't made for me. But that doesn't matter. I know they were a gift that was made with love, so I protect them." I said as I started lacing my boots.

"Who do they belong to?" Beau asked curiously.

I glanced at Enoch, not knowing how I should answer the question.

The indecisive look that he gave me in return was absolutely no help.

Finally I stood and walked to stand beside Beau.

"If I tell you, will you not tell anyone else?" I asked quietly.

Beau looked up at me and nodded quickly.

"These belong to the ghost." I said seriously.

Beau looked at me incredulously. I couldn't tell if he wanted to believe, or wanted not to.

"It's okay if you don't believe it. But please just understand that I believe it. These belong to the ghost, they were made for him by someone who loved him very much." I said, trying to be as honest as I possibly could.

"You know someone who loved a ghost?" Beau asked incredulously.

I smiled at the question and quietly said, "He wasn't a ghost then. He was a boy about my age and this was his room."

Beau looked around the room quickly, then asked, "Is he a bad ghost? Why did he hurt Grandma?"

"Oh, you heard about that..." I muttered absently, then noticed that Enoch looked disturbed by the question.

"He isn't bad. Grandma was trying to clean out this room, like she did all the others. She was going to take his things and pack them away, including the soldiers." I said, hoping that Beau could understand.

Beau was quiet for a moment, then he looked around the room and quietly asked, "Is he here?"

I nodded, unsure of what Beau's reaction was going to be.

Beau looked upward, then said, "I understand now. I won't touch your soldiers."

I glanced at Enoch to see if he wanted me to relay a message for him.

After a moment of indecision, Enoch walked to the table where the soldiers were displayed, then started turning them, to face Beau.

"HOLY SHIT!" Beau exclaimed as every bit of color seemed to drain out of his face.

"It's okay, Beau. I think that's just his way of thanking you for being considerate." I said as I moved behind him and pulled him into a gentle hug to assure him.

I could feel that Beau was trembling and looked at Enoch with concern.

"What's his name?" Beau finally asked in a whisper.

"Enoch." I said, hoping that I wasn't making a terrible mistake by revealing so much.

"Would it be okay if I brought you some of my soldiers so we could play with them, Enoch? Mine are little and green and made out of plastic so you can play with them all you want and it won't hurt them." Beau asked as he looked around the room.

I looked at Enoch with question, not knowing how to answer.

"Tell him that I would love to play whenever he visits." Enoch said with a tender smile.

"Enoch would like that. He told me to tell you that he would love to play whenever you visit." I said, a little choked up at the loving look on Enoch's face.

"That's great! I'll 'member to bring them next time!" Beau said happily.

"We'd better get going. Your brothers are waiting on us." I said seriously.

"Oh yeah. We'd better go!" Beau said and seemed to be immediately restored to his state of boundless energy.

"Just remember not to go too fast while we're on the stairs. Enoch can't see them." I said slowly, waiting for Beau's reaction.

"Enoch's coming with us?" Beau asked with delight.

"Yes. That's why I wanted to go to the graveyard. It's been a hundred years since he's been able to visit his mom's grave." I said frankly, then glanced at Enoch, hoping my words hadn't hurt him.

Enoch didn't exactly look happy, but I could tell that he understood that I needed to explain.

"Isn't his mom a ghost too?" Beau asked in a small voice.

"No. At least, not here. When she died, I'm sure her spirit went to heaven." I said gently, not at all comfortable with this turn in the conversation.

"But why didn't Enoch go to heaven? Was he bad?" Beau asked curiously.

"No. But that's a long story that we don't have time for now and your brothers are waiting on us. Now that you know about Enoch, I was hoping that you could help me guide him to the family graveyard and back to the house safely." I said seriously.

Beau thought about it, then said, "Yeah. I'll help Enoch to go see his mama."

"And we can't tell anyone else about Enoch." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

"You never told no one else?" Beau asked in wonder.

"Nope. And I don't plan on telling anyone else either." I said honestly.

Beau thought for a moment, then in a serious voice that was strangely like his father's he said, "We'd better get goin'."

"Yeah." I said, then glanced at Enoch to see if he was ready to go.

* * * * *

"We was about ready to come up and look fer y'all." Joe Bob said as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

I hadn't considered how we would explain our extended absence, but before I could even try to come up with anything, Beau said, "Mark has all kinds of really old, really cool stuff in his room."

Joe Bob smiled at his younger brother and I could tell that no further explanation was needed.

"We ready to go?" Joe Bob asked as he looked to each of us.

I glanced at Enoch and could see some apprehension in his eyes.

"Good. Let's go out the back way. It's quicker." Joe Bob said, then began to lead the way.

* * * * *

I stepped outside and was surprised by the warmth. I guess I'm just used to it being cool outside in the morning.

"We can cut past the tool shed over there and it's straight on back." Joe Bob said as he automatically took the lead.

"Do we need to go slow?" Beau asked me quietly as he looked behind me.

I glanced at Enoch who was nearly at my side, then said, "No. I think we'll be fine as long as it's flat."

Beau smiled at the answer, then I noticed that Jim Bob seemed to be lost in thought.

"Is everything alright, Jim Bob?" I asked casually.

He turned to look at me with question, then seemed to realize what I had asked.

"Yeah. I was just... thinking about stuff." Jim Bob said timidly.

"He does that a lot." Beau said frankly.

"Don't worry about it, Beau." I said with a smile to the younger boy.

"When you get a little older, there will be quite a few things that you'll feel like you need to figure out."

"Like what?" Beau asked curiously.

I smiled as I thought about the question, then slowly said, "You grow up seeing the world through a child's eyes. Then one day you wake up and

realize that everything is different. It just takes some time to decide how you feel about everything."

Beau looked at me incredulously and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Don't worry about it. It's just part of growing up." I said as I moved over to give Beau a casual hug.

* * * * *

"The family graveyard is right over there." Joe Bob said from ahead of us.

I looked where he was pointing and saw an eerie and depressing sight.

There was a large fenced in area with a single scraggly tree at the edge of it.

I suppose that when you're dead, it doesn't really matter where your remains are put, but this graveyard seemed to be such a desolate place that no one, living or dead should be left there.

"Stop!" Joe Bob barked as he froze in his tracks.

I immediately did as I was told and looked at Joe Bob with question.

"Mark, don't move. There's a rattlesnake right next to your leg." Joe Bob said in an anxious voice.

I looked down and there it was, not even six inches away from my leg and looking right at me.

"Did you bring your gun?" Beau asked from my other side as Jim Bob guided him to back away from me.

"I left it in the car. I didn't think about needin' it." Joe Bob said in an absent tone.

"What's wrong?" Enoch asked in puzzlement.

I had to think about how to answer Enoch without being obvious about it.

"What do you usually do to make a rattlesnake lose interest in you?" I asked in a trembling voice, really hoping he had an answer.

"I shoot it." Joe Bob said frankly.

Enoch followed my terrified gaze down to the ground and started feeling around, apparently using his own illumination to see the snake.

It seems that I wasn't the only one who could sense Enoch, because the snake suddenly turned it's head and started rattling its tail.

I know you see that stuff in the movies all the time and it never really seems that scary. Guess what. That rattling sound is one of the most horrible things I've ever heard in my life.

When it seemed that the snake was about to strike at him, Enoch reached out his transparent hand and grabbed the snake firmly by the neck.

All I could do was stand and stare as the snake writhed and struck at the insubstantial hand that was holding it.

I know it takes a lot of concentration for Enoch to affect something in the real world. The look of determination in his eyes told me that he was putting every bit of his energy into lifting the snake and throwing it into some tufts of sun baked grass about six feet away.

I took in a deep breath of relief as I looked at Enoch with appreciation.

"What just happened?" Jim Bob asked quietly as he held Beau close to his chest.

My mind raced as I tried to think of a good way to explain what they had just witnessed.

"I guess it got scared and ran away." I said weakly, not being able to think of a more reasonable answer.

"Um, yeah. Rattlesnakes always fly away when they get spooked like that." Joe Bob said dryly, then looked at me to convey that he wasn't buying my explanation for an instant.

"You would know better than I would." I said with a nervous chuckle, which only sounded about half as hysterical as I felt.

"We should go to the graveyard now. It's right there." Beau said as he worked his way out of Jim Bob's grasp.

"Y'all watch your step." Joe Bob said seriously, then turned to me and said, "You might want to keep an eye on the sky too. Just in case."

I couldn't contain my smile at his statement, then looked at Enoch to see how he was doing.

"The serpent didn't get you, did he?" Enoch asked with concern.

"I'm fine." I whispered as we started walking again. "Thanks."

* * * * *

"Here it is. Y'all remember to be respectful." Joe Bob said as he stepped through the open gate which looked as though it hadn't been closed in decades.

I glanced at Enoch at my side, then steeled myself for the task of looking for Enoch's mother's grave.

"Who are we looking for?" Beau asked as he walked close to my side.

"I don't know her first name, but her last name would be Miller." I said, then looked at Enoch with question.

"Elsbeth Miller." Enoch said quietly.

"Elsbeth." I said to Beau, then looked at Enoch with sympathy.

"Don't worry Enoch, we'll find your mama." Beau said quietly, then hurried away to start looking at grave stones.

I waited for Enoch to look at me again before quirking my head to indicate for him to follow.

Enoch gave me a weak smile, then moved to my side so we could start looking at gravestones.

* * * * *

"Um, Mark?" Beau called out from about three rows of graves ahead of me.

"Did you find it?" I asked suddenly.

"No.... not exactly." Beau said with an apprehensive look.

"What's up?" I asked as I abandoned my own search to find out what Beau had discovered.

"You should just..." Beau trailed off as he looked at the grave, then looked at me desperately.

When I finally made it to his side, I immediately understood his concern.

The marker was old and weather worn, but still able to be read.

'HERE lies the Body
of Enoch Miller who
departed this Life'

"I didn't even think that we might find Enoch's..." Beau trailed off uncomfortably.

As I was about to answer, I saw Enoch walking to the grave stone to look at it with his own illumination.

I held my breath as I waited for his reaction.

Enoch turned suddenly to look at me with fear in his eyes.

"Come here, E." I said gently as I opened my arms to him.

Beau was looking around to see where his brothers were and if they were watching us.

"I don't care if they see. This is more important." I said as much to Beau as to Enoch as I accepted him into my arms.

"I'm not dead. I swear it." Enoch whispered into my ear.

"Shhh. I believe you." I whispered, then noticed Beau watching me with concern.

In a voice loud enough for Beau to also hear, I said, "Allie mentioned last night that her father had a grave stone put in the family graveyard for Enoch even though they never found his body."

"Why would he do that?" Beau asked curiously.

"Probably to keep people from asking about what happened to Enoch. I know he had an older brother. It's possible that he might have come asking questions." I said as I held Enoch firmly.

"Jim Bob's heading this way." Beau said suddenly.

"I love you, E." I said, then gave him a quick kiss before letting him go.

"You LOVE Enoch?" Beau asked with a wide eyed expression.

"I thought you knew that." I said as Enoch moved to my side and held me gently.

"No. I mean, I knew that you talked to Enoch and stuff, but I didn't know that you were in love with a ghost." Beau said frankly.

"Hi Jim Bob." I said as I watched him approaching.

"Joe Bob wants to know if y'all are about done here." Jim Bob asked cautiously.

"Well, I didn't find the one that I was looking for, but I guess that since I'm living here, I can come back and look whenever I want." I said honestly.

"If you don't find it here, you can try the graveyard over at grandpa's house. It's not very big and it's mostly really old graves." Jim Bob said frankly.

I looked at Enoch with question and saw realization dawning in his eyes.

"My mother was buried on my father's land. That must be the graveyard that he's talking about." Enoch said with excitement.

"We're going over there for dinner tonight, so we could look then." I said for Enoch's benefit as I looked at Jim Bob.

"We should get grandpa to go with us. He knows all the history. Going with him makes it like walking through a museum." Jim Bob said thoughtfully.

Considering Jim Bob's personality, it wouldn't surprise me to find out that he frequently visited museums.

"Are you ready to go?" Beau asked curiously.

"Yeah. But what's the hurry? I thought we didn't have anything else planned until dinner at Grandpa's." I asked as I walked with Jim Bob and Beau down the rows of graves with Enoch following just a step behind me.

"Joe Bob needs to stop in at his work to do something. He says that it'll just take a few minutes, but he needs to do it this morning." Jim Bob said casually.

"Do you think that we can stop at the library while we're in town?" Beau asked hopefully.

"Yeah. As far as I know." Jim Bob said consideringly, then gestured toward the open gate where Joe Bob was waiting for us. "Did you have anything you wanted to do in town?"

I was about to say 'no, of course not', when something occurred to me.

"Yeah. There's someone in town that I'd like to see." I said as I tried to sound completely casual about it.

"I thought you just moved here." Beau said as he looked at me curiously.

I smiled at Joe Bob as we joined him by the gate and we all started walking as a group back toward the house.

"I did just move here." I said with a smile at the younger boy, then looked at Jim Bob and said, "But Jim Bob was telling me about a friend of his and I think I'd like to meet him... I mean, if there's any way we could do that."

Jim Bob looked at me with wide, terrified eyes and it was obvious that he was thinking that I was one step away from telling his brothers everything he had told me.

"Are you talking about Lonny?" Beau asked me curiously.

I smiled at Beau and said, "I think that was his name."

"Isn't Lonny's house just a few blocks from the library?" Beau asked Jim Bob curiously.

"Yeah." Jim Bob muttered absently.

"I could drop you two off at Lonny's house, then go do my stuff and take Beau to the library." Joe Bob said thoughtfully.

"Would you mind?" I asked Jim Bob quietly.

From his expression, I could tell that he wasn't thrilled with the arrangement, but finally he gave me a non-committal shrug.

As we came to the expanse of flat rocks where we had encountered the snake earlier, Joe Bob casually said, "Best watch out for low flying snakes through here."

I couldn't help but smile at Enoch.

When he saw that he had my attention, he quietly asked, "Do you think that I'll be able to go with you?"

I smiled as I nodded.

Even though I hadn't actually planned what I was going to do before I asked to visit Lonny, I had automatically assumed that Enoch would be going with me.

The silence that settled over us was uncomfortable, so I decided to try and make some sort of conversation.

"So Beau, you want to go to the library. Does that mean that you read a lot?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah. Our Ma don't let us watch TV. She says that TV makes your brain little and your ass big, and she ain't havin no little brained, big assed kids in her house." Beau said bluntly.

"I think your Ma sounds like a very wise person." I said to Beau with a smile, then asked, "What do you like to read?"

"I just finished the first Tarzan book. But there's about a thousand more of them." Beau said frankly.

"Closer to thirty." Joe Bob said fondly to his younger brother as we approached the back of the house.

Beau looked at Joe Bob as if to say 'same thing'.

* * * * *

"Do y'all need to get anything before we go into town?" Joe Bob asked, directing his question mostly toward me.

"I think I'm good to go." I said as I glanced at Enoch curiously.

"I gotta pee." Beau said as he raced to the bathroom just off the kitchen.

"Are we expecting any dust storms or anything like that today?" I asked Joe Bob curiously.

Joe Bob walked across the entry hall and looked out the front door for a moment, then walked back inside and said, "I don't think we're going to get any weather today, but if a dust storm does come up, it won't be until later."

"I'm ready!" Beau announced as he rushed into the entry hall with us.

"Go on and get in the car. Me and Mark will be right there." Joe Bob said as he looked me in the eyes.

Uh oh. I should have thought of this.

Joe Bob has been patient all morning, but it looks like he's about to ask for some answers.

Jim Bob looked at me with concern for a moment before following Beau out the door.

Joe Bob looked over at the door to make sure it was closed, then cast an expectant look at me.

What should I try to explain away first? The flying rattlesnake or my sudden need to visit Lonny?

"Me and Pa talked last night and he said that the best way I could help Jim Bob was to let you handle it." Joe Bob said frankly.

I felt a little bit relieved by the words but noticed that Enoch was watching me with concern.

"Does Lonny have something to do with it?" Joe Bob asked as he looked me in the eyes.

I considered how I should answer that, then noticed that Enoch was walking toward Joe Bob.

"Yeah." I said reluctantly, then added, "I just haven't figured out if he's the problem or the answer. That's why I need to talk to him."

Enoch had walked past Joe Bob and had his hand on the door knob.

I tried not to stare at Enoch, but was curious to know what he was doing.

"Find a way to let me know if you need for me to distract him." Enoch said with accomplishment at being able to find the door by himself.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Joe Bob asked quietly.

"You're already doing it." I said with a smile. "You're driving us into town and taking Beau to the library. That should give me time to get things sorted out. By the time you come back for us I hope I'll have a clue about how to help Jim Bob."

"That thing with the rattlesnake..." Joe Bob began to say.

I gave a subtle nod to Enoch and he slowly opened the door.

Joe Bob spun on his heel and looked at the door with wide eyes as the old door creaked open.

"Try thinking about it this way, if Lonny turns out to be a snake, you already know that I can handle it." I said as I started walking toward the door.

Joe Bob seemed to be considering the words as I stopped in the doorway to wait for his reaction.

"You're trying to help Jim Bob. That's all I need to know." Joe Bob finally said, then walked past me, out the door.

"Thanks E." I said as I looked into his beautiful, jade green eyes.

"I want to hold you." Enoch said desperately.

"That's good, because I'm planning on you riding all the way into town on my lap." I said with a grin.

Enoch blinked with surprise, then broke into a glorious smile.

* * * * *

I didn't really pay too much attention to anything on the trip into town except the beautiful, insubstantial boy riding on my lap and holding on to me more tenderly than I can ever remember anyone holding me in my life.

I did notice a few knowing glances from Beau, but he didn't ask any questions.

I'm not sure if he knew exactly what Enoch was doing, but he knew that something was going on.

"Y'all can expect me to be back by to pick you up in about half an hour." Joe Bob said as he pulled up to a neat little house at the corner of two one-way streets.

Jim Bob nodded to his brother, then got out of the car.

It took me a little bit longer to guide Enoch off my lap and out of the car, but I finally made it out.

"I don't think Lonny is going to be very happy that I told you." Jim Bob said nervously.

"I made you a promise and I intend to keep it." I said seriously.

"So you didn't tell Joe Bob?" Jim Bob asked nervously.

"No. But if he hasn't figured it out yet, he probably will soon." I said frankly.

At Jim Bob's terrified look, I hurried to explain, "The fact that your dad asked me to talk to you means that he's almost figured it out."

"I don't know what to do." Jim Bob said as tears filled his eyes.

"I know. That's why I'm here with you right now." I said, trying to sound like I knew what I was doing. "Introduce me to Lonny and we'll see what we can figure out."

At Jim Bob's uncertain stare, I quietly added, "We'll fix this."

Chapter 8: The Bumpy Road

I looked at Enoch with concern before following Jim Bob up to the front door of the house.

Jim Bob glanced at me uncertainly, then took a key out of his pocket and let himself in.

"Lonny, are you here?" Jim Bob called out as he stopped in the living room.

I noticed that the house seemed to be small, but very neat and tidy. As I looked around, I noticed that a large, black upright piano seemed to dominate the room. There was something unsettling about the house, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"I'm in the bedroom." A voice called casually from down a hallway.

"I brought my cousin Mark to meet you." Jim Bob said nervously.

I shared a glance with Enoch, wondering if this had been such a good idea. It seemed wrong to put Jim Bob through all of this stress.

There was a long moment of silence, but finally a man walked into the room and looked at me cautiously. He seemed fit and relatively good looking. Not as good as Enoch, but... never mind. He was okay.

A few seconds after he entered the room, I spotted something. It was kind of like what you see when a dust mote floats through the sunlight streaming in the window. Except that this wasn't a dust mote, and there wasn't any sunlight coming from the hall. The little flickering 'almost nothing' seemed to be following right behind the man.

"Hello Mark. It's a pleasure to meet you. Jimmy mentioned that you were coming to town." Lonny said to me in a pleasant tone of voice that wasn't entirely convincing.

"Yeah. Nice to meet you, too, Lonny." I said, trying to sound casual, then carefully added, "Jim Bob has told me all about you."

Lonny looked at me with surprise, then past me, at Jim Bob with question.

"Mark." Enoch said urgently, momentarily drawing my attention. "There is a spirit here. Please don't do anything until I have spoken to him."

I gave Enoch a slight nod and hoped that neither Lonny nor Jim Bob had noticed.

"I'm sorry." Jim Bob whispered as his eyes filled with tears.

That seemed to be enough confirmation for Lonny. He started to go pale as panic filled his eyes. It looked like he wanted to say something, but no sound came out. He just kept looking from Jim Bob, to me and back.

I'm not a mean spirited person... not usually. But this guy wasn't winning me over. I could see that Jim Bob was scared to death of his reaction, and Lonny wasn't doing anything to comfort him.

I glanced over at Enoch in time to see him looking back at me with a worried look on his face.

Oh great! I guess this means that Enoch doesn't have any good news for me either.

"Why don't we..." Lonny began to say, then seemed to falter.

"What I mean to say is, would you like to sit down?" Lonny asked nervously and I could see beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

I glanced over at Jim Bob and he looked like he was about to pass out.

"Yeah, sure." I finally said, then turned to Jim Bob and said more quietly, "Come on, let's sit down."

It took a moment, but either his legs gave out or he heard me. For whatever reason, he did finally sit.

"Mark." Enoch said as he approached me. "The ghost is named Bobby and he used to be Lonny's lover."

Well, that seems about right.

"Jim Bob, why did you bring Mark over here?" Lonny asked cautiously.

"Mark. Bobby died when he was Jim Bob's age. In fact, he says that him and Jim Bob look much alike. He says that Lonny is using Jim Bob to replace him." Enoch said anxiously.

"I don't know." Jim Bob responded in a trembling voice.

"Bobby says that Lonny lives alone, he works alone. Lonny has convinced himself that Jim Bob is important to him because he's rejected everything else that might have brought him happiness." Enoch said quickly.

I looked around the room with the new information in mind. Everything was neat and clean, but there wasn't a single thing in the room that would prove that it hadn't been that way for the past ten years. It was sort of like being in a museum. The room, probably the entire house, was frozen in time.

I glanced at Jim Bob and came to a decision.

"Okay guys, it's time for us to get real." I said, mostly to get their attention.

When Lonny and Jim Bob were both finally looking at me, I just flat out said, "Jim Bob, I understand that you're timid and worried about what Lonny thinks about you, but really, grow a pair. No one is going to respect you if you won't speak up for yourself."

Thankfully, both Lonny and Jim Bob were stunned enough for me to be able to continue.

"Lonny, first off, I'm gay. So this isn't about that. Second, the age thing, if you two are happy, then it's none of my business how you two get your jollies. So this isn't about that either." I said firmly.

"But Jim Bob isn't happy. His dad sees it, his brothers see it. Hell, I only met him yesterday, and I see it." I said while I still had the momentum. "So Lonny, what I'm saying is that you two need to make some changes because what you're doing now is tearing Jim Bob apart."

"What do you know about it?" Lonny was finally able to sputter indignantly.

Oh! Damn! He pushed the totally wrong button with THAT attitude.

"What do I know?" I asked in return, then glanced at Jim Bob for a moment before saying, "I know that having to lie is making Jim Bob distance himself from everyone who loves him and gives him support. I know that if you loved him at all, even a little bit, then you'd take into account what's best for him, not just what your dick is telling you."

That seemed to stun him a little bit. Good. Because I was on a roll.

"And since you asked, I'll tell you what else I know." I said, now looking Lonny right in the eyes. "I know that your lover, Bobby, died when he was just about Jim Bob's age, and that Jim Bob even looks like him."

Lonny's jaw actually dropped at the invocation of Bobby's name.

"I know that back when Bobby was alive, so were you. The two of you used to have fun. But now all you ever do is think about how good life used to be. You've turned your back on what's real and immersed yourself in a fantasy. Which, I suppose is fine, except that you're drawing Jim Bob into it with you, and that, I won't allow."

"You... How do you..." Lonny stammered.

Okay, that was a pretty good question. And I didn't really have much of an answer that didn't involve telling the truth. So I looked to Enoch to see if maybe he had an idea.

I was surprised to see him standing in front of the piano with the little flicker that was Bobby just over his shoulder.

When he noticed my look at him, he quickly said, "It appears that you could use a distraction. Bobby suggested that I play something for you."

I couldn't hold back a smile and gave him a quick nod.

Lonny caught my change in expression and followed my gaze toward the piano just in time to witness it start playing, seemingly, all by itself. The slow, lilting melody of Moonlight Sonata is creepy under normal circumstances. But hearing it now, like this, it even sent a chill up my spine.

"How... Oh my..." Lonny trailed off as he started to pale.

"Jim Bob, help me. I think he's going to faint." I said as I rushed to Lonny's side.

"I want to see a picture of Bobby." Jim Bob said firmly.

The tone of his voice was not only enough to draw my attention, but also to snap Lonny out of his slide into unconsciousness.

Lonny looked at Jim Bob with concern as he gently said, "Jimmy, please don't..."

"Don't call me that. My name is Jim Bob."

Actually, given the choice, I would have gone with Jimmy, but I kept that to myself and watched to see what the new and improved, testicled version of Jim Bob would do next.

"Whatever you say, Jim Bob." Lonny said cautiously. "Let's just sit down together and talk..."

"Fine. But first I want to see a picture of Bobby." Jim Bob said firmly.

"Please, let me explain." Lonny said desperately.

"Mark!" Enoch said suddenly.

I turned to look at him and saw him holding a framed picture, ready to toss it to me.

I held out my hand, ready to catch it.

I'm not much of an athlete, but fortunately I was able to catch the picture. Then I turned in the same motion and presented it to Jim Bob without even looking at it.

Lonny looked at me with shock, then asked, "What are you?"

"His family." I said frankly.

After a moment of looking at the picture, Jim Bob looked up at Lonny and bitterly asked, "Those were his clothes you dressed me in, weren't they?"

"Let me explain..." Lonny began to say, but was interrupted.

"You never loved me! You loved him and you wanted me to be him." Jim Bob said as angry tears began to fall down his cheeks.

"If you'll just let me explain." Lonny pleaded.

"Fuck you!" Jim Bob said, then turned and rushed away toward the door.

"Jimmy!" Lonny said desperately as he tried to follow, but I automatically stepped into his path.

"You need to start living in the here and now. Rejecting what you have in front of you and trying to reclaim something that is gone is going to destroy you." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

"But I loved him so much." Lonny said in a small voice, and for the first time, I think I was actually seeing the genuine person underneath.

"Then be the person that Bobby loved." I said gently. "Be real. Live in today. Maybe even find someone to love. Not a replacement for Bobby, but a whole new love, a first love. That's the best way to respect Bobby's memory. Think about it Lonny, you didn't just lose Bobby, you lost yourself."

Enoch moved to my side and whispered something to me.

I thought about whether or not I should say it, but Enoch seemed to think it was important, so I continued, "And don't let anyone else wear Bobby's clothes. It's creepy."

Lonny looked at me with question.

"Seriously man, you're in Norman Bates territory. Let Bobby go." I said, then turned to leave.

"I don't know if I can." Lonny said in a trembling voice.

"Open your eyes, look at the world around you and make a new dream that's based in today. I bet it takes a whole lot less energy to live in now than it does to try and recreate 'then'." I said honestly, then quickly added, "I need to go check on Jim Bob."

Lonny's tearful gaze was on the floor as I walked out of the room.

* * * * *

"Bobby wanted me to thank you." Enoch said quietly as we walked onto the small porch. "You said what Lonny's been needing to hear for a long time."

Before I could respond, I saw Jim Bob walk around the side of the house. I could see fresh tears on his cheeks, but his expression was more angry than sad.

"Are you okay?" I asked him with concern.

"How did you know?" Jim Bob asked as he walked up to look me in the eyes.

For just a moment, I was missing the timid little mouse version of Jim Bob that I had arrived with.

Before I could even attempt to answer, Jim Bob continued, "Was it really that obvious? Was I *that* blind?"

"No. It wasn't obvious." I rushed to say before he took over the conversation again.

"I can't believe I was so stupid! I believed every single thing he told me!" Jim Bob said as his tears fell.

"Part of loving is trusting." I said weakly, not really having much more to offer him at the moment.

"Yeah. Well, so is part of letting yourself be used." Jim Bob said bitterly. Good point.

"I need a shower." Jim Bob said with a look of disgust at the house.

"Your brothers should be here any minute to pick us up. You can take a shower as soon as we get home." I said gently.

"Beau always takes forever at the library. It's just a few blocks from here." Jim Bob said as he started walking.

I made sure that Enoch was by my side before I started to follow.

* * * * *

We walked in silence for a few minutes before Jim Bob quietly said, "You have some kind of special powers, don't you?"

I thought about how to answer that, and finally settled on a simple, "Yeah." To my relief, Jim Bob didn't pursue the topic.

As we approached the library, Jim Bob stopped to look me in the eyes.

"Thank you, Mark." He said sincerely.

"I'm really sorry it worked out the way it did." I said honestly. "If we went there and I found out that Lonny really loved you, I would have done anything in my power to have made it work out for you."

Jim Bob gave a weary little chuckle, then quietly said, "I believe that you would have. Thanks."

"Let's go find your brothers." I said, trying to inject some cheer into my voice.

As we continued our walk toward the library, a few steps behind Jim Bob, I felt Enoch's arm slip around my waist.

"I love you, Mark." Enoch said, close to my ear.

"I love you too, E." I whispered in return.

* * * * *

Finding Joe Bob and Beau in the library only took a minute. Jim Bob seemed to know right where they would be.

After checking out three books for Beau, we made our way back to the car.

Once we were on the road, Joe Bob finally asked, "How'd y'all's visit with Lonny go?"

"I don't want to talk about Lonny." Jim Bob said firmly.

Joe Bob's eyes went wide at the announcement, then he looked at me with question.

"Snake." I said, by way of explanation, then quietly added, "I handled it."

I could tell that Joe Bob had about a million questions that he wanted to ask, but fortunately, he kept them to himself.

As the ride continued, I just enjoyed the wonderful feeling of Enoch riding on my lap.

Did I mention that the road to our house is bumpy?

Well, if I did, I probably complained about it.

Please disregard that. I have a new found appreciation for bumpy roads... there should be more of them.

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As we got out of the car, Jim Bob quietly asked, "Did you bring your pistol?"

Oh shit!

Joe Bob looked at his brother, then slowly said, "Yeah. It's in the trunk. What did you need it for?"

My mind started racing, trying to figure out how to stop him if he wanted to go back and 'visit' Lonny.

"I just feel like shooting right now. I'll pay you back for the bullets when we get home." Jim Bob said seriously.

"Don't you be worryin' about that. You just go and do what you need to do to feel better." Joe Bob said as he walked to the trunk of his car.

I felt a wave of relief wash through me. The last thing I want is to start my life in Texas as an accessory to murder.

"Thanks, Joe Bob. I'm going to be out back for a while." Jim Bob said as he accepted the gun case.

"Just remember that I'm here if you feel like talkin'." Joe Bob said sincerely.

"I know." Jim Bob said quietly, then revealed a slight appreciative smile as he added, "Thanks."

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As we walked to the front door, I noticed that Beau was reading as he walked.

"I think Beau's gonna be fine on his own for a few minutes." Joe Bob said to me in a low voice. "You and me need to talk."

I glanced at Enoch with concern, not knowing what I was going to do next. Silently, I followed Joe Bob into the house.

* * * * *

"Beau, you go on in the living room and sit down before you run into something." Joe Bob said in the entry hall.

A slight change in his course was the only indication that Beau had heard his brother's words as he read his book.

I watched Beau walk out of the room, then cautiously glanced at Joe Bob.

The intense gaze fixed on me made me internally squirm. It was everything I could do not to look away, but I had to meet his eyes to prove that I wouldn't be intimidated.

Finally, Joe Bob's expression seemed to soften a little, and he quietly asked, "What was goin' on between Jim Bob and Lonny?"

"I think you can guess." I said simply. I didn't know very much about the relationship and wouldn't want to make matters worse for Jim Bob by making too many assumptions.

Joe Bob's eyes dropped as he gave a weary sigh.

"But I think that whatever they had is over now." I added, not knowing if that would make Joe Bob feel better or worse.

We stood there silently for a long moment as Joe Bob seemed to be debating within himself about how he felt about what his brother had been through.

I heard three gunshots from behind the house, then silence.

Finally Joe Bob looked up at me and I was surprised to see that his eyes were welled with unformed tears.

"Why couldn't he come to me? He's my brother." Joe Bob asked in a voice that seemed to be less of a question than him voicing his inner thoughts.

Even so, I felt that I should answer ,since he had given it voice. "If I were to guess, I'd say that Jim Bob didn't want to disappoint you. He got into something that was bad for him, but tried to deal with it himself rather than do anything that would make you or your dad think less of him."

Joe Bob shook his head absently, not disagreeing but simply as an expression of wonder at what he had overlooked.

"I think that, when he's ready, it would be a really good thing for Jim Bob if you let him know that you still love him and that there's nothing he could ever do that would make you stop." I said quietly, hoping that Joe Bob would hear my words.

"Jim Bob was supposed to be going over there for piano lessons." Joe Bob said distantly. "Since me and Pa never done nothin like that, we didn't know that him spending so much time with Lonny wasn't normal. I mean, to learn something complicated like that takes a lot of time, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. It does." I said, pretty sure that Joe Bob wasn't hearing my words.

"But I saw the changes in him..." Joe Bob added darkly, "I saw him pulling away from the family. I should have known then that somethin' wasn't right."

"Jim Bob isn't a little kid. He's almost an adult. He's got to be able to discover things for himself and make a few mistakes." I said gently, then added, "Yeah. Things went wrong for him and he got hurt, but think about it. Next time, he's going to be more likely to take a good look at his situation before he jumps into anything."

Joe Bob nodded slowly.

"You and your dad kept an eye on things from a distance, then when you could see that he was having a problem, you did something about it. I don't think you have anything at all to be sorry about. You gave Jim Bob the space to deal with it himself, then when he needed help, you saw that he got it." I said in a more serious voice.

Another two gunshots sounded from behind the house, then silence reigned again.

Joe Bob seemed to be considering things, then looked at me and asked, "That thing with the snake and the door, what was that?"

"Do you want me to move something?" Enoch asked from a small narrow table against the wall just inside the front door.

I nodded to him, and Joe Bob followed my gaze.

Enoch slid a small porcelain figurine a few inches on the table.

"You mean like that?" I asked quietly.

Joe Bob's eyes went wide, then he cautiously said, "Yeah. That's what I was talkin' about."

I debated within myself about if I should share Enoch's real story. I could make something up, something about telekinesis or whatever. Joe Bob wouldn't ever know the difference.

But when I looked into Joe Bob's eyes, I realized that he deserved the truth. Joe Bob was a really good and caring person who I had come to respect in the short time that I had known him.

"You've heard the story about the ghost in the locked bedroom upstairs, right?" I asked quietly.

"Grandpa said that it attacked Grandma once." Joe Bob said cautiously.

I nodded, trying to figure out just how much I should share with him. I didn't really know where to begin and I didn't want to make things more complicated by saying it wrong.

"You let the ghost out of the room and... he's helpin' you." Joe Bob said speculatively.

I was surprised at what Joe Bob had been able to deduce from so few clues. No one could ever say that Joe Bob wasn't smart.

"Yeah. His name is Enoch." I said quietly.

"Where is he now?" Joe Bob asked cautiously.

I glanced over at Enoch, still by the narrow table, then tilted my head, indicating for him to join us.

When Enoch was standing at my side, I put my arm around his shoulders, so Joe Bob could see exactly where he was.

"This is Enoch. He used to live here, in this house, about a hundred years ago." I said seriously.

"And he helped you to help Jim Bob?" Joe Bob asked cautiously.

"I couldn't have done it without him." I said honestly.

"Thank you, Enoch." Joe Bob said toward the seemingly empty space at my side. "If there's anything I can do to repay you, just have Mark let me know."

I smiled at Joe Bob's offer, glad that he was taking everything so well.

"Would you ask him not to tell anyone else about me? I really don't want my presence to become common knowledge." Enoch asked hopefully.

"Enoch only wants for you not to tell people about him." I said quietly.

"I doubt that anyone would believe me, anyway." Joe Bob said with a grin. God! Joe Bob's cute!

"Also, please let him know that Beau is aware of my presence and that we intend to play with toy soldiers at some future date." Enoch said thoughtfully.

I couldn't help but smile at the thought, then told Joe Bob, "Beau knows about Enoch, and they have plans to play with toy soldiers sometime soon."

"You told Beau?" Joe Bob asked with surprise.

"Yeah. That's why it took so long when we went upstairs so I could change." I said frankly.

"I was meanin' to ask about that..." Joe Bob said, then trailed off.

"You can ask me anything." I said immediately.

Joe Bob looked at me cautiously, then quietly said, "I've heard that gay guys can tell when someone's... like them."

"Gaydar." I said with a nod.

Joe Bob slowly nodded, then quietly asked, "Is Beau gay?"

"I don't know." I said honestly, then added, "I don't think he knows yet."

Joe Bob nodded that he had heard.

"Why? Do you think that he is?" I asked curiously.

"Sometimes he goes into the bathroom when I'm showering and hangs around while I'm shaving. I don't know if that's right or not." Joe Bob said slowly.

"Beau's probably just curious about what it's like to be older. Seeing your body and you doing things like shaving will give him a frame of reference for what is 'normal' when his body starts changing." I said thoughtfully, then added, "I think it's a good thing."

Joe Bob slowly nodded.

Three gunshots sounded from behind the house, and I looked at Joe Bob with concern.

"About Lonny." Joe Bob said in prelude, "What happened?"

I shook my head and said, "That's not for me to tell. You need to talk to Jim Bob about that when he's ready."

"But is he going to be causing trouble for Jim Bob?" Joe Bob asked cautiously.

I chuckled and said, "No. I think Enoch and I were able to scare the crap out of him enough that he won't cause Jim Bob any problems."

"I still feel like I should be kicking his ass for hurting my brother." Joe Bob said honestly.

"If there's any ass kicking to be done, it's Jim Bob's job to do it." I told him seriously.

Joe Bob reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"But it's possible that Jim Bob might be willing to accept a little bit of instruction in ass kicking." I said speculatively.

"Jim Bob's always been timid and kind of bookish." Joe Bob said slowly.

Suddenly there were three shots fired in the back yard, in rapid succession.

"I get the feeling that he might be open to your instruction today." I said frankly.

"Yup. You may be right about that." Joe Bob said with a nod.

We stood there quietly for a moment. I guess the subject had been exhausted and neither of us knew what to say next.

Finally, Joe Bob said, "I'm gonna go in and fix us somethin' for lunch."

"Do you need some help?" I asked automatically.

"Naw. But I wouldn't mind some company." He responded with a casual smile.

Damn! He's cute!

I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and saw that Enoch was watching me and seemed to want to say something.

"I need to talk to Enoch for a minute or two, but then we'll be in to keep you company." I said, more to Enoch than Joe Bob.

A nod was Joe Bob's only response before walking toward the kitchen.

* * * * *

"You like him." Enoch said quietly.

"Yeah. He's great." I admitted.

"And he's very attractive." Enoch said regretfully.

"Yes. He is." I said as I realized what Enoch was feeling.

Enoch looked at me with anguish in his eyes.

"He's my cousin, my family. My feelings for him don't change how I feel about you one bit." I said honestly.

Enoch looked at me uncertainly, obviously needing more.

"I love you, E. And as soon as the crack between the dimensions opens enough for you to get through, I'm going to show you just how much." I said with a smile.

"I can hardly wait." Enoch said with a tender look that seemed much relieved.

"One kiss, then let's go in and keep Joe Bob company while he cooks." I said as I slowly encircled Enoch in my arms.

It may have only been one kiss, but it was a doozy.

* * * * *

Once in the kitchen, there wasn't much I could do but stand aside and watch Joe Bob work.

I'd never really watched anyone cook before, but watching Joe Bob was kind of hypnotic. It was like he had this big master plan of everything that needed to be done and knew exactly where he needed to be and what he needed to be doing every second.

The sound of a movement drew my attention away and I saw Jim Bob standing in the doorway. I automatically looked to see if he was holding a gun and was relieved to see that he wasn't.

"Thanks, Joe Bob. I feel better now." Jim Bob said quietly.

"Is the gun unloaded and locked up?" Joe Bob asked without looking away from his work.

"Yeah. It's locked in it's case and the case is locked in the trunk." Jim Bob said seriously, then timidly asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Naw. I've got this." Joe Bob said absently. "You and Mark can hang out in here or go in the other room if you want. Lunch will be ready in about

fifteen minutes."

I looked at Jim Bob curiously, hoping he could tell from my expression that I was okay with whatever he decided.

After a long, thoughtful moment, Jim Bob finally met my eyes and tilted his head toward the door, indicating that I should follow.

I glanced over at Joe Bob and noticed that he had stopped his meal preparation. He gave me a quick, grateful look, then went back to his work.

* * * * *

"Are you really okay?" I asked gently as we stopped in the entry hall, between the kitchen and living room.

"I don't know." Jim Bob said honestly.

I gave him an understanding smile and nodded.

"But there's something that I, um... well, I've kind of wondered about." Jim Bob said nervously.

"You can ask me anything." I said seriously. Although I know his father and brother both want desperately to help him, it seems that neither of them have the life experiences to be able to advise Jim Bob in his current circumstance.

"Lonny said, I mean, when I asked him about it, he said that we didn't have to, um... you know... use condoms." Jim Bob finished in a whisper.

"Did he say why not?" I asked hesitantly.

Jim Bob shrugged and looked away.

"Well, I guess before I make any assumptions, I should ask about what you two did. I mean, I can understand if you're shy about it, but there are things that lovers can do that don't introduce any risk of transmitting disease." I said carefully.

"We only ever did one thing. But we both liked it, so we did it a lot." Jim Bob said as he reluctantly glanced at me.

I waited expectantly, hoping he would give me at least a hint at the sexual act they had shared.

Jim Bob seemed to be waiting for me to say something. Finally I gave in and prompted him by saying, "What one thing?"

Jim Bob blinked in confusion for a moment, then nervously said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I guess... I mean, I forgot to tell you..."

I nodded, waiting for him to tell me what they had done.

"I fucked him in the ass." Jim Bob said simply. After all the stammering and nervousness, he said this last in as casual a voice as if he were talking about the weather.

I glanced at Enoch and found him staring at Jim Bob with astonishment.

I can't say that I was freaked out by the announcement or anything like that, but there was definitely some measure of surprise.

"Is that bad?" Jim Bob asked me nervously.

"No! Not at all. As far as I'm concerned, the world needs more tops." I said quickly.

Jim Bob gave me that confused look that was becoming all too familiar.

"And to answer your original question, what you two were doing was having unprotected sex." I said, trying to make myself sound clinical and instructive.

"But Lonny said it was okay. I mean, neither one of us are sick or has ever had anything, so he said that we didn't have to worry about it." Jim Bob rushed to explain.

"Jim Bob, your health and safety is YOUR responsibility. Not mine, not your father's or your brother's and not even Lonny's. It's up to YOU to be informed about potential dangers and make wise decisions to protect yourself." I said firmly, then quietly added, "Unfortunately, it's not just you who has to live with the consequences of your decisions. Everyone who loves you will have to deal with what happens if you don't act responsibly."

"Do you think I have AIDS?" Jim Bob asked in terror.

"No. I seriously doubt it." I said consideringly, then added, "But think about this. Lonny lied to you about the things he didn't want you to know about his past. That being the case, I think it's best if you get tested."

Jim Bob's eyes lit up with a fresh wave of fear.

"Like I said before, I doubt that you have AIDS, HIV or anything else. But until you get tested you'll always have that niggling little doubt in the back of your mind. You need to be tested so you won't have to worry about it at all." I said frankly.

"I wouldn't know where to go... I mean... how do you get tested?" Jim Bob asked in an overwhelmed tone.

"If I were back home, I could tell you." I said thoughtfully, then slowly added, "If I can get to a computer with Internet access for a few minutes, I'm sure I can find a discrete place to get it done. They'll probably have all kinds of good information for you, too."

"Do you think we could do it today?" Jim Bob asked in a low voice.

"Lunch should be ready in a few minutes, we can ask Joe Bob if he'd mind doing some more driving." I said with a smile to try and put Jim Bob at ease.

"Are... are you going to tell him... I mean... about..." Jim Bob trailed off weakly.

"Jim Bob, your brother loves you very much and is really worried about you. Even though it might be uncomfortable for you to talk to him about this, I think you've kept too many things from him already. Just be honest with him and let him share this with you. He wants to help you. Please let him. I know that nothing you could do could possibly make him happier right now."

I couldn't tell from Jim Bob's expression what he was going to decide to do. But I had said my piece and whatever happened next was up to him. Anything more that I might do would only make Jim Bob dependent on me to make his decisions for him.

"It's ready, y'all come on in to lunch." Joe Bob called from the doorway.

Perfect timing. That's just one more thing on the long list of things I admire about my cousin Joe Bob.

* * * * *

This time, I not only got to eat my food, but I even tasted it and remembered eating it. Joe Bob is really a fantastic cook.

Through the entire meal, Jim Bob seemed to be trying to work up the courage to talk to his brother, but just as he seemed to be about to speak, he'd retreat into his shell again.

As we were all finishing up, Jim Bob finally looked Joe Bob in the eyes and quietly asked him, "If you have time, can we go for a walk? I need to talk to you about something."

"I always have time. All ya ever have'ta do is ask." Joe Bob said in his slow drawl.

I smiled at Joe Bob's reaction, then said, "Beau and I will clean up the lunch dishes."

Joe Bob gave me a nod and a smile, then gestured for his brother to lead the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"Is Enoch here?" Beau asked as he helped me wash the lunch dishes.

"Yes. He's right here beside me, about a foot away." I said with a smile at the younger boy.

"Can we do something with Enoch? I know it's gotta be boring for him watching us doing stuff without him all the time." Beau asked seriously.

I shrugged, then looked to Enoch and asked, "What do you feel like doing?"

The wicked smile on Enoch's face took me by surprise, and before I knew it, I had an answering smile.

"What'd he say?" Beau asked curiously.

"He's thinking about it." I said, then looked at Enoch with question.

"Actually, I can think of one thing that we might all enjoy very much." Enoch said thoughtfully.

I nodded for Enoch to continue.

"Well, as wonderful a day as it's been, I am rather missing the familiarity of the bedroom. So, if you wouldn't mind, we could go to the bedroom and I could listen to you play your flute while Beau reads his book." Enoch said hopefully.

I smiled at the suggestion, then turned to Beau and said, "Enoch would like to listen to me play my flute and thought that you might enjoy reading your book."

"But I want to go with you." Beau said dejectedly.

"That's what I'm talking about. You can sit with us and read while I'm playing." I said with a grin.

Beau thought about it for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "That'd be great! I love reading, but sometimes I don't like it because I have

to do it alone. This way it'll be even better."

"Then let's finish up these dishes so we can go up to my room." I said as I turned my attention back to my work.

Beau nodded happily as he took his place at the rinse sink, ready for me to hand him the next washed dish.

* * * * *

Believe it or not, I do know some cheerful songs.

I'm not sure if it was being able to see Enoch's look of delight, or maybe Beau's smile as he was reading, or maybe it was knowing that Jim Bob and Joe Bob were talking about things. It was probably all of the above.

For whatever reason, the music that I felt like playing was joyful and full of life.

As I finished an impromptu little melody that I made up on the spot, I noticed Joe Bob and Jim Bob standing side by side in the doorway.

"That was really beautiful." Joe Bob said in an impressed voice.

"Thanks" I said shyly.

"Jim Bob was sayin that there's some things he wants to do in town. Do y'all feel like doin that?" Joe Bob asked in his slow, drawling way.

"What're we gonna do?" Beau asked curiously.

"Well, I thought we could go back to the house, so Mark could use the computer to look up some things, then we'll see from there." Joe Bob said frankly.

I looked at Enoch with question, not knowing what he would want to do.

"Although leaving the house is somewhat terrifying to me, it is also exciting. I feel alive for the first time in a very, very long time." Enoch said in answer to my unvoiced question.

I smiled at Enoch, then noticed that Joe Bob was watching me.

"Sounds good to me. Do I need to change or is this good enough?" I asked as I looked down at my jeans and hiking boots.

"That'll be fine. Like Pa says, 'Anyplace that'd expect me to dress nicer than this is a place I wouldn't want to visit anyway'." Joe Bob said with a grin.

Without even trying, Joe Bob already reminds me of his dad, but when he tries... it's an absolutely *perfect* imitation.

"I guess I'm ready then." I said as I glanced at Enoch.

He gave me a loving smile, then walked to my side.

Joe Bob stepped away from the doorway with Jim Bob following close behind.

Beau walked ahead of us, then turned back to say, "I'll walk slow on the stairs so you can help Enoch."

"Thanks Beau, we really appreciate all your help." I said quietly as I guided Enoch out of the room.

Beau looked at me like I was nuts and finally said, "This is, like, the coolest thing ever."

I shared a smile with Enoch, then we worked together to get him down the stairs.

Suddenly, Enoch's words came back to me and I realized that I, too, was feeling alive for the first time in a very, very long time.

Chapter 9: Tests

The bumpy roads worked their magic again and there wasn't any way that I could keep the smile off my face.

I noticed that Beau hid a few giggles as we were riding, but I don't think it was too obvious.

Joe Bob took us into town, and as we went I noticed the buildings getting older and shabbier.

We passed through an area which I supposed was 'downtown' although I wouldn't say that it was that much different than anyplace else we'd been.

And he kept on driving.

I think that maybe what was throwing me off is that back in Michigan, people tended to build up, but it seemed like here, people tended to build out.

I don't know, maybe it has to do with the wind.

Anyway, he drove and drove and drove.

Finally, he came to a place, I don't think you'd call it a mobile home *park*, exactly. It was more like a mobile home village.

Instead of having lots of trailer homes shoved into tight slots, like hard drives in a server (yeah, I'm a nerd. Sue me). Each of the mobile homes was on what looked to be a decent sized piece of land where they could have a large (scraggly, dried out) yard. There were one or two with what looked to be gardens, although I can't imagine what you could grow in this sweltering heat.

When Joe Bob pulled up in front of the trailer, I was a little bit confused at what I was looking at. It seemed that unlike any of their neighbors, they had chosen to park their trailer on a diagonal across the lot. That left them a triangular lawn in front (or it would be a lawn if anything would grow there).

I got out of the car more slowly than the rest, mostly due to helping Enoch get himself situated, but also from trying to get my footing in the staggering, sweltering, mind-blowing heat. (Did I ever mention that it's hot here?)

When I walked up the steps to the small porch in front of the trailer, I could feel a rush of cool air gushing out of the open door in front of me.

I knew this to be the work of the legendary evaporative coolers that Grandpa had mentioned when we first arrived.

* * * * *

As I walked into the trailer, Jim Bob and Beau had turned right, and Joe Bob had turned left.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the much dimmer interior of the trailer. But once I could focus, I could tell that I was standing in a hallway. To my right were what I presumed to be bedrooms, and to my left was a respectable sized living room.

When I walked into the living room, I could see that it led into the kitchen area with a large oblong dining table, surrounded by various types and styles of chairs. There was a woman quietly working in the kitchen, and when she saw me she whispered, "Y'all be quiet. I just put the baby down."

I nodded that I had heard, then saw Joe Bob walk into the kitchen through a doorway that didn't make sense.

I mean, the trailer is basically a long rectangular box. The doorway that he stepped through would take him outside the box.

"I got the computer booting up. It'll take a minute." Joe Bob said quietly, then carefully added, "Mark, this here's my ma. Her name is Lindie."

"It's nice to meet you. But I'm not sure if I'm supposed to call you Cousin Lindie or Aunt Lindie." I said cautiously.

"Just call me Lindie. It's nice to meet you, Mark. Joe Bob's had nothin but good to say 'bout you. How'd things go with Jim Bob?" She asked with concern.

"I think everything's going to work out." I said simply.

I wasn't about to 'out' Jim Bob to his mom, or anyone else.

"Computer's back here." Joe Bob said in his endearing, abrupt way, then led me through the doorway he had used earlier.

Suddenly, it all became clear to me. What I was seeing is where they had taken two single wide trailers and sort of 'T-Boned' them together, making the kitchen on the end of one trailer butt up against the side of the kitchen in the middle of the other trailer, that we were in.

I had to step up to get into the second trailer, but then I was in another kitchen area, albeit with a different type of cabinetry and linoleum.

To one side, in what I suppose might have once been a dining area, there was a small sturdy table with a computer keyboard sitting on it. I think the thing that caught me most by surprise was the 'big butt' CRT monitor taking up half the table. I hadn't seen one of those things in a few years.

I turned at a movement and saw that Jim Bob and Beau had joined us.

I glanced under the table to verify that there was an enormous, 'old school' tower down there, and from the sound of it, it probably had enough fans running to cool an entire room.

"Internet's kinda iffy out in this part of town. But it seems to be working at the moment." Jim Bob assured me. I glanced over my shoulder to see that Joe Bob had fallen back to silently supervise. Unbeknownst to Joe Bob, Enoch was standing right beside him, with basically the same posture and expression.

Although I felt a little odd doing it while everyone else was standing, I sat on the wooden chair in front of the computer and opened a browser.

As I started typing on the keyboard, it was like a trip down memory lane. The big clunky keyboard had fantastic action. I didn't realize what I'd been missing, using the latest and greatest.

Saying that their Internet was slow was being kind about it. But I did eventually get my search results to come up. I clicked on a couple different sites before I found one that seemed to have everything that we would be needing.

"Do you have a printer?" I asked as I looked around.

"Yeah. It's over here. Hang on." Jim Bob began to say, but Joe Bob moved from behind us and beat him to it. It turned out that their printer was sitting on the other side of a little wall, on one of the kitchen counters, a few feet away from where I was sitting.

From my other side, Jim Bob quietly said, "That map's not going to print. You need to switch it to directions only."

I've had my own printer issues over the years. I once had an ink sucking beast that could drain a cartridge in four pages. So I was perfectly happy to do as Jim Bob suggested.

The sound when the printer started printing, however, just about made me come up out of my chair. It whirred and chattered so loudly that I was afraid that I might have broken something.

I couldn't help it. I had to see what was happening, in case I had to unplug it or throw water on it or something.

When I moved around the little wall, all was explained.

I don't think I ever actually 'saw' a dot matrix printer before. I heard of them, and I'd seen pictures, but I'd never seen one in use. The paper was in a folded stack behind the printer and it looked like it was one long continuous piece of paper. It had faded green and white lines on it and there were holes running up and down both sides.

When the noisy thing finally stopped chattering, the paper advanced and Jim Bob stepped around me to tear it off. I'd seen stuff like this before in movies from, like, the 60's.

"Re-inking the ribbons is a chore, but we make it work." Jim Bob explained as he tore the perforated 'tractor feeds' off the edges of the paper.

"Pa found us six new ribbons down at the Goodwill last month, so we'll probably be keeping this thing going for a while longer." Joe Bob interjected.

It'd be really easy to say something mean about the antique setup that they've been using, but I've got to hand it to them. Even though some of this equipment was probably made before I was born, they get it to do what they need it to and make it work. You've got to admire that.

Just as Jim Bob was handing the printout to me, Emmylou and a younger girl stepped out of the hallway further back in the trailer.

"Y'all need to keep quiet. The twins is having their nap." Emmylou said in a harsh whisper.

"Mark needed to print some directions." Jim Bob told her simply.

Emmylou apparently didn't see me when she entered, because when she looked at me, her whole demeanor changed.

"Pa told us that you like dick." Emmylou said in a slightly challenging voice.

"I'm guessing we have that in common." I responded before I could think better of it.

"Who's Dick?" The little girl at Emmylou's side asked curiously.

"Reba, this is your cousin, Mark. You remember Pa telling us that him and his ma was coming?" Joe Bob asked as he gave Emmylou a disapproving glare.

"Yeah. They said you was gonna live at the old house. I wish I could live there. It's so big and nice!" Reba said excitedly.

"Shhh. Daisy and Dixie is sleepin." Emmylou warned her sister.

"Garth's asleep in the living room, too." Jim Bob told them frankly.

"Mark. Is that everything we was needin here?" Joe Bob asked curiously.

"Yeah. This should do it." I said as I glanced at the paper to be sure that all the directions had printed.

* * * * *

Whoever came up with that saying about 'out of the frying pan' must have been from West Texas.

Oh.

My.

God.

It's hot!

Don't get me wrong, having Enoch on my lap again made it totally worth it, but I can't for the life of me figure out who was travelling through a place that resembles the fifth circle of hell and decided, 'Hey! This'd be a nice place to stop and raise a family.'

Anyway, I ended up giving Jim Bob the paper with the directions and Joe Bob took us right where we needed to be.

Joe Bob pulled in through the alley and there was a nice big parking lot in the back.

"Y'all go on in and do what you need to do. Beau and I will stay out here." Joe Bob said in a tone of voice that didn't invite argument.

Considering how far out of his way Joe Bob has gone to help his brother, I can't fault him a bit for not wanting to go in to a LGBT resource center, especially when there really isn't anything he could do.

"We'll try not to be too long." I said, and noticed that Jim Bob looked to be about two seconds from passing out.

"Take a deep breath, then let's get this over with. We don't want your brothers baking to death waiting on us." I said in what I hoped was a soothing voice.

Jim Bob took in a shaky, nervous breath, then nodded that he was ready to go.

I glanced to my other side to find Enoch standing, waiting to be shown where we were going.

"Come on." I said with a smile as much to Enoch as to Jim Bob, then led the way.

* * * * *

It was considerably cooler inside the building.

Well, it kinda had to be.

I guess I had expected something more like a doctor's office waiting room, but what I found looked to be more like a gift shop.

There were shelves and racks scattered around everywhere. Rainbows were in abundance.

"Are you boys sure you're in the right place?" A middle aged man asked when he saw us enter.

"Listen, my cousin needs an HIV test. Can you do that here?" I asked bluntly. I didn't want to be rude, but engaging the man in casual conversation was likely to bring up questions that Jim Bob didn't want to answer. And besides, Joe Bob and Beau were out in the car in the sweltering heat.

"Yes. We certainly can. There are some forms that we'd like to have you fill out." The man said as he ducked into a side room for just a second, then came back with two clipboards.

"By the way, my name is Boyce." The man said as he returned and held out a clipboard to each of us.

"Mark doesn't need a test." Jim Bob said regretfully.

"It's okay. I don't mind taking one." I said seriously.

At Jim Bob's look of question, I continued, "It's not a big deal. These days, it's just a fact of life, so I'd better get used to it."

Jim Bob looked to be about two seconds from running away and hiding under something.

"Just how truthful do we have to be on these things?" I asked Boyce curiously.

"Officially, every single word should be the God's honest truth." Boyce said seriously, then broke into an evil grin as he continued, "Unofficially, we'd appreciate an active phone number and that the person answering the phone be able to give you a message."

"Our phone isn't hooked up yet, so I'll give you my mom's cell phone." I said as I quickly filled in the information.

"I can't..." Jim Bob began to say in a trembling voice.

I walked to his side and saw that he hadn't filled anything out at all.

"Just copy mine, well, except for your name. We'll need to know whose test they're calling about." I said as I handed my clipboard to him.

"If you want to come on back, we can get you taken care of in just a few minutes." Boyce said to me with a smile.

"Do you mind if Jim Bob comes back with me? I think it'll make him feel better if he can see that it's not something horrible." I asked hopefully.

"Yes. I think that's a very good idea." Boyce said with a warm smile.

* * * * *

"Hugh, we have two young men here who've made a very wise and courageous decision. Would you please take care of them while I keep an eye on the front?" Boyce asked pleasantly as he handed off the clipboards.

While Boyce looked like the type of person you'd expect to meet walking into any market or shop, Hugh, on the other hand, looked like what you'd expect to find walking into any biker bar or tattoo parlor.

I was taken aback by the man's appearance. I mean, first of all, he was bald. He had piercings and tattoos everywhere (well, everywhere that I could see, I can't even imagine what's been done to what I couldn't see). I guess the only thing that snapped me out of it was seeing Enoch's reaction. I suppose in his time, he only got to see someone like Hugh when the circus came to town.

"First time for both of you?" Hugh asked curiously.

We both nodded.

"Alright, then. Who wants to be first?" Hugh asked as he glanced at the clipboards.

To my surprise, Jim Bob stepped forward and said, "I will."

That was fine with me. I was just as happy to stand back and watch it all happen.

"Would you be Mark or James?" Hugh asked curiously.

"I'm James." Jim Bob said quietly.

Hugh wrote something on the clipboard, then wrote something else on a sheet of labels on the countertop. We were both silent as we watched him take one of the labels and stick it to the paper on the clipboard.

"Just come over here and have a seat and I'll have this done before you know what happened." Hugh said as he seemed to have finished all his preparations.

Jim Bob sat down and waited. He looked a lot less nervous than before. In fact, he looked to be less nervous than I felt.

"If you don't mind me asking, what made you think to come in for a blood test today?" Hugh asked casually.

"Why do you need to know that?" I asked suspiciously. I mean, yeah, I'm scared, but no one gets to hurt Jim Bob while I'm around.

"Everything I need to know is on the clipboard. You don't have to tell me anything. Just, with you being so young, I was curious." Hugh answered honestly.

It seems that Jim Bob accepted his explanation, because he finally said, "I guess I was being stupid, because I believed my boyfriend when he said we didn't need to be safe."

Hugh gave a sympathetic chuckle, then said, "Yeah. I know how it is. Hook up with the wrong guy and they'll have you believing all kinds of crazy things."

Jim Bob sadly nodded.

"This will only hurt for a second. Just a pinch." Hugh said, then expertly inserted the needle into Jim Bob's arm.

To his credit, Jim Bob gave very little reaction.

"So, this boyfriend of yours, is he being any trouble?" Hugh asked as he slowly drew the blood.

"No. Mark helped me see that he's been lying to me and I broke up with him today. I don't think I have to worry about him anymore." Jim Bob said quietly.

"Are you alright? If you need someone to talk to, we've got a list of people who will listen and won't judge you." Hugh said seriously.

"I think I'm going to be okay." Jim Bob said with a timid smile at me.

"Well, if you end up needing to talk to someone. Remember us." Hugh said sympathetically, then held a cotton ball in place as he withdrew the needle and added, "You're all done."

"That's it?" Jim Bob asked in surprise.

"Yep. We'll send this off and have your results in about a week. We'll call you when the results are in." Hugh said simply as he took the vial of blood and stuck the already filled out label on it.

"Thanks for being so nice. I was really scared coming in here." Jim Bob said as he stood.

"That's what I'm here for." Hugh said simply, then looked at me and asked, "You ready?"

I hope I didn't look anywhere as nervous as I felt. I mean, Jim Bob did it. Mousey, timid little Jim Bob did it. So why am I feeling like I just want to run and hide.

Oh yeah, the big scary biker with the big fucking needle, that's why.

Somehow, and don't ask me how, I got up the courage to go over and take the seat where Jim Bob had been sitting.

"So, what's your story, Mark?" Hugh asked as he went through the same routine of writing on the clipboard and filling out the labels.

Enoch was watching me with concern, but not saying anything.

"I just wanted to come with Jim Bob so he wouldn't have to go through this alone." I said quietly.

Hugh looked at Jim Bob, then back at me before seriously saying, "It gives me hope, seeing kids your age not only taking responsibility for yourselves, but also helping each other do the responsible thing."

"We'll probably grow out of it." I said with a nervous chuckle.

Yeah. Weird dry humor is one of my defense mechanisms. Who would have guessed?

"Just a little prick." Hugh said softly with a grin, then stuck my arm.

"Hey, it's not that little." I responded in playful mock anger.

"Don't make the guy with the needle laugh." Hugh said with a smile.

I glanced beside me and saw that Enoch was still watching, but not looking as nervous as before. I suppose my weak attempts at humor encouraged him.

"You guys make sure that you check out the literature when we're done here. It's all free, and we've got the latest information on HIV, AIDS and safe sex. I mean, condoms are important, but the best way you can protect yourselves is with knowledge. There's a lot of half-truths and some outright lies going around out there, especially on the Internet. It's important to know what's real." Hugh said firmly.

"I just moved here from Michigan. My school was pretty good about teaching us about this stuff, but I guess you're right. It's good to know that there's a place where we can get the facts if we need to." I said seriously.

I felt when he placed the cotton ball on my arm, then withdrew the needle.

"Well, that's it. I feel like I should have a trophy or something to give you." Hugh said with a grin.

"The cotton balls are enough." I said as I stood.

"You're easy to please. I need to find a guy like you." Hugh said playfully.

"Too late. I'm seeing someone." I said as I smiled at Enoch.

"I guess it's true. All the good ones are taken." Hugh said dramatically, then led us to the door.

* * * * *

When we stepped back into the shop, we saw that Beau and Joe Bob were standing just inside the entry door.

"Are they with you?" Boyce asked in a whisper as he approached us.

"Yeah, that's my brother. He drove me here." Jim Bob said quietly.

"Good. When he wouldn't meet my eyes, I started to get nervous." Boyce said honestly.

"He's still a little freaked about the whole 'gay' thing. Jim Bob just came out to him this morning." I said carefully.

"And he volunteered to drive you here?" Boyce asked to confirm.

Both Jim Bob and I nodded.

Boyce looked at Joe Bob for a moment, then quietly said, "We need more straight people like him."

"Yeah. I think so, too." I said with a smile.

"Hugh said you had some literature about HIV and stuff." Jim Bob muttered nervously.

"Yes. Right over here. You can help yourself." Boyce said as he directed Jim Bob to a rack of pamphlets.

While he did that, I walked over to Joe Bob and asked, "How are you guys doing?"

"It got a little too hot to be sittin out in the car." Joe Bob muttered.

I could see how uncomfortable he was, and wanted to do something to make him feel better.

I glanced around and spotted the answer.

"Do you guys like Snickers?" I asked curiously.

"Yeah!" Beau said immediately.

When Joe Bob saw that I was waiting for an answer, he reluctantly nodded.

I motioned for them to walk with me to the sales counter as I said, "This is a store. It's got some things that you don't need, but it's got Snickers, too. It's no different from any other store."

"What are those guys doing?" Beau asked as he pointed at a rather graphic matted poster.

"They're being gay." I said simply, then asked, "Do you want a Snickers?"

As I had hoped, Beau turned his full attention back to me.

* * * * *

"Boyce, I'd like to introduce my other cousins, Joe Bob and Beau. This is Boyce. He runs this place." I said as I tried to sound somewhat formal.

"It's nice to meet you. Can I get you anything?" Boyce asked pleasantly.

"Can I have four Snickers?" I asked casually.

"Coming right up, that'll be two dollars." Boyce said as he placed them on the counter.

I paid the man, then handed one each to Beau and Joe Bob.

Just then, Jim Bob approached with about eight or ten pamphlets in his hands.

"I got this for you." I said as I handed him a Snickers bar, then asked, "Are we done here?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Jim Bob said shyly, but I could definitely hear the gratitude under his words.

I turned to look for Enoch, but didn't have to look far. He was right by my side.

"Have a good day, Boyce." I said as we started to leave.

He waved and smiled.

* * * * *

Seriously... fucking... hot...

I mean, really, how in the hell do these people live like this?

"How was it?" Joe Bob asked his brother curiously.

"Not bad." Jim Bob said consideringly, then added, "I was kinda scared for a minute, but the guy who took our blood looked a lot like Bubba Ray. That relaxed me a lot."

First, Bubba Ray? Seriously?

Second, a big bald pierced tattooed biker looking guy puts Jim Bob at ease?

I think I'm getting a taste of what Enoch's going through. It's a big, weird world and I'm a million miles away from anything that seems 'normal'.

"What'd you do in there?" Beau asked his brother curiously.

Jim Bob looked back at me from the front seat, silently begging me to explain.

"We just got blood tests." I said simply to Beau, who was sitting at my side in the back seat.

"Why? Are you sick?" Beau asked curiously.

"Probably not. But if we were sick, we'd want to know about it so we wouldn't accidentally make someone else sick." I said carefully.

Beau thought about that for a moment, then seemed to accept the answer.

"What do I do now?" Jim Bob asked distantly, and I wasn't sure that he was talking to me.

"You live your life the best way you know how." I answered.

Jim Bob looked at me as if I'd just said something incredibly stupid.

"Jim Bob, it's natural to be depressed and feel lost. I get that. But try and think about what you used to enjoy doing before..." I almost said it, but caught myself in time. "...the piano lessons."

"All I'd do is read. I've never done much else." Jim Bob admitted regretfully.

"Then find some really good books that make you feel good and read those. I bet it'll help." I said confidently, as if I really knew what I was talking about.

After a few quiet minutes of riding in silence, Jim bob finally said, "I haven't read anything but school stuff for quite a while. I miss that."

"Then it's settled. And if you run out of things to read, I happen to know a few websites that you'll probably like." I finished with a grin.

"I brought my army men." Beau said from beside me, breaking the mood.

"We'll play with them when we get back to the house." I said with a smile, then saw an answering smile on Enoch's face.

When he noticed, he quietly said, "You're amazing."

Since we were around other people, all I could do was look at him inquisitively.

"I don't understand all of what happened today. But what I do understand is that you go out of your way to help and protect those you care about. You have uncommon wisdom and a tremendous heart." Enoch said passionately.

I don't know if I believe in karma or anything like that, but when Joe Bob turned onto the bumpy road, right at that moment... well, life was good.

* * * * *

When I got out of the car, I was going to tell the guys what the plan was. Unfortunately, I need to learn to take into account the two or three minutes

it takes for me to be able to talk when the breath has been knocked out of me by searing, relentless heat.

By the time we got to the front door, I was finally able to say, "I think Beau had something planned for us involving plastic soldiers. So you guys have time if you need to go and do anything."

They were both silent for a moment, but Joe Bob finally turned to Jim bob and said, "Mark was thinkin you might want to learn some a the self defense moves that Pa taught me."

Jim Bob looked at me with surprise.

"I just thought that since shooting the gun helped, this might help some more." I said weakly.

Jim Bob thought it over for a few seconds, then turned to his brother and said, "Yeah. It might."

"Beau and I will be in the living room if you need us for anything." I said as I started walking away.

Joe Bob nodded and led Jim Bob off in another direction.

"If you guys want to go into the living room and get the soldiers out, I'm going to get my flute." I said with a smile.

"Should I stay here?" Enoch asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Stay with Beau. I'll be back in a minute." I said with a quick smile.

"Where is he?" Beau whispered as he looked around.

"He's here next to me, but if you put out your soldiers, I bet he'll move over there with you." I said with a smile.

Deciding to let them work it out, I left to go up to my room.

* * * * *

I grabbed my flute and made a point of looking at the mirror to see if the rift had opened any more.

No such luck.

When I entered the living room, I had to stop and smile.

Beau and Enoch were on their knees at the coffee table, arranging two camps of little green soldiers, preparing them for battle.

I silently watched for a few minutes, then walked fully into the room and said, "It looks like you guys might need some inspirational music for this epic campaign."

"Do you know some?" Beau asked hopefully.

"As a matter of fact, I do. That's the type of music they taught us to play in band class." I said as I moved to the couch and began to assemble my flute.

"I like your music. It makes me feel stuff." Beau said as he kept the majority of his attention on the soldiers.

"Thank you, Beau. That really means a lot to me." I said honestly as I quickly worked the valves to make sure that nothing was sticking.

Once I was assured that everything was working the way it was supposed to, I started playing 'Time in a Bottle', to warm up.

When I was finished with that, I said, "You guys let me know when you're ready for some inspirational music."

"My guys need it now. They're scared, so they need you to help them to be brave." Beau said as he looked at me seriously.

"You got it." I said with a smile, then started into one of many band pieces that I knew that were specifically written to inspire.

* * * * *

I don't know where the time went.

Beau and Enoch had some epic battles while I played just about every 'fight' song that I knew or had ever heard. I could tell that Enoch was enjoying the play as much as Beau was.

When I had finished playing one particularly spirited piece, I looked up and saw Joe Bob watching us. I felt a spark of fear at what he might have witnessed, before I reminded myself that he already knew about Enoch.

"We should be leaving for Grandpa's soon." Joe Bob said quietly.

"Okay. It'll just take us a minute to put things away." I said with a smile at him.

"You play really good." Joe Bob said before walking out of the room.

"Are you guys ready?" I asked as I turned my attention to Enoch and Beau.

"We was having fun." Beau whined.

"I know. I was having fun, too. But Grandma's expecting us for dinner, and we don't want to make her mad, do we?" I asked as I tried to maintain a serious expression.

"No. You don't wanna ever make Grandma mad." Beau said as he began to gather his army men back into their gallon ziplock bag.

"It bothers me that you have to slow your pace and change your plans for me to accompany you. Perhaps I should stay here." Enoch said regretfully.

"No way, E. We're going to visit the family graveyard." I said firmly.

Beau looked at me curiously, then to Enoch's place at the other end of the coffee table.

"He's thinking about staying here while we go to grandma's for dinner." I said simply.

"You gotta go with us! It won't be any fun without you." Beau said earnestly.

From the expression on Enoch's face, I could see it as his resolved crumbled.

"With Beau's help, it won't be any problem at all. What do you say?" I asked in a wheedling tone as I continued to break down my flute.

"If you really want me to go, I will accompany you." Enoch finally relented.

I looked to Beau and said, "He said that he'll go with us."

"That's awesome!" Beau said happily.

I looked around to see if there were any stray casualties left over from the battles, then asked, "Are we ready to go?"

Beau hopped up and seemed to be overflowing with energy.

Enoch and I got up more slowly and followed as he left the room.

* * * * *

Jim Bob looked a little worse for wear. I don't know exactly what he and Joe Bob did, but from the stiff way he was walking and his slightly disheveled appearance, I'm guessing that they had some rather spirited hand-to-hand combat training of some sort.

The ride to Grandpa's house was quiet, but everyone seemed to be of good cheer.

When we finally arrived, Beau was the one to jump out of the car and run ahead to open the gate.

Pulling up in front of the house, I spotted Grandpa walking around the side of the barn, with a large turkey slowly following him.

Beau took off like a shot across the yard as Enoch and I got out of the car much more slowly.

Since Joe Bob and Jim Bob were both moving stiffly, I don't think anyone noticed.

By the time the rest of us had caught up to Beau and Grandpa, I guess Beau had already asked him about us going to visit the family graveyard (possibly more than once).

"The real family graveyard is over at the other property..." Grandpa was saying when Beau interrupted.

"We went there this morning. But we was wantin to see this one, too." Beau said excitedly.

"Beau, mind your manners. Don't interrupt Grandpa." Joe Bob said firmly.

Grandpa smiled with appreciation at Joe Bob, then placed a hand on Beau's head and ruffled his hair a little before saying, "I suppose that we can walk over and take a quick look. A little exercise is probably just what we need before dinner."

* * * * *

At what temperature does human flesh melt? Because, I think we're about there. But this was something important to Enoch, and Beau was helping us out, in his own unique way. So there was no way I could get out of it.

"Give me a minute." Joe Bob said as he hurried back to the car.

"Bobo, do you want to get us a few bottles of water from the back fridge?" Grandpa asked with a smile.

Beau didn't have to be asked twice.

"How'd things go today?" Grandpa asked me and Jim Bob with concern.

As much as I would like to have told him, it's not my place. I looked to Jim Bob with question, with no real clue of what his answer might be.

"I think things are going to be better, now." Jim Bob said consideringly.

"That's what I like to hear." Grandpa said with a contented smile.

And that's all he needed to know to be satisfied. I don't know exactly why it is that that surprised me so much, but it did. I guess I expected a game of 'twenty questions', but Grandpa seemed to be assured that everything was being handled.

When Joe Bob walked up, I immediately noticed that he now had a pistol in a holster at his side.

"Good thinkin, Joey Bob." Grandpa said decisively, then started walking back toward the house.

When I looked at Joe Bob, I'm sure that I must have had a look of question or concern.

"In case of low flying snakes." Joe Bob said with the slightest hint of a smile.

I swear, a straight man that cute should be illegal.

Beau showed up next with an armload of water bottles, and handed one to each of us as we waited for Grandpa to return.

The small rifle that Grandpa was carrying caught my immediate attention.

"Watch your step out here. Won't be much in the way of wildlife, this time of day, but the rattlers like to lay out and sun themselves." Grandpa said as he led the way toward the gate that led into the pasture.

Beau and Jim Bob raced ahead of us and climbed over the gate.

Grandpa smiled at their energy, but stopped and opened the gate for Joe Bob and me to walk through.

* * * * *

Enoch seemed nervous, but remained silent as we walked.

No one was talking, and I took the opportunity to appreciate the bizarre, barren beauty of the unspoiled West Texas open range. Then again, it might just be the heat playing with my perception of things.

I don't know how long we walked before the little fenced in graveyard finally came into view.

It was small.

It wasn't quite as creepy as the graveyard at the 'big house' but, let's face it, it's a graveyard. It's creepy by definition.

* * * * *

"This graveyard dates to before we owned this land. Most of our relatives are buried at the other property, but there's a few of us here." Grandpa said as he slowly walked among the tombstones.

It was curious to me that although many of the stones were weather worn, that there were others that looked as though they were only a few years old. When I looked at one of the newer looking stones, I could see that the date on it was nearly one hundred years old.

"Some of these gravestones look almost new." I said in puzzlement.

Grandpa smiled at me and said, "Somehow, I ended up being the keeper of the family history. Along with making sure that the genealogy is kept up to date, I also tend to the graveyards to be sure that they don't get too overgrown, and that the gravestones are replaced when needed, so no one will be forgotten."

"So you know about everyone who's buried here?" Beau asked curiously.

"Not as much as I'd like, but I think I know a little bit about most of them." Grandpa said quietly.

I looked around for a moment, to see if I could spot the grave that I was looking for, but finally asked, "Do you know where Elsbeth Miller is buried?"

Grandpa seemed surprised by the question, but didn't ask how I knew that name. He simply motioned for me to follow him.

"Here's Elsbeth and her husband Jeremiah. He used to own this land. From what I hear, Elsbeth died not long after arriving here. Spider bite, if memory serves. After that, Jeremiah drank himself into an early grave." Grandpa said from distant memory.

I walked to Elsbeth's grave and put one hand on her headstone. Well, for a few seconds, anyway. The thing was so hot that my hand would have started to sizzle if I kept it there any longer.

Enoch reluctantly followed me, then went down on one knee and brought one hand up to trace the writing carved into his mother's headstone.

"They had two sons." Grandpa continued, "The older one, Paul, went to Silver City, New Mexico, to try and make his fortune. It didn't turn out that way, and by the time he came back to check on his family, they had all passed away."

"Do you know what happened to him?" I asked as I kept a close watch on Enoch, in case he needed me.

"No. He left here and never returned." Grandpa said quietly, then added, "After Jeremiah's death, it was left to the younger son, Enoch, to settle the family's affairs. It seems that my grandfather, Marshall James, felt sympathy for the boy and took him in as a member of the family. Enoch sold his father's land to Marshall James, but was still despondent over his mother's death. One night, he left, taking nothing with him. It's supposed that he must have died, but no body was ever found. Marshall was so heartbroken over losing his adopted son that he had a stone placed in the 'new' family graveyard, to prove to anyone who might ask that Enoch was counted as a member of our family."

"That's so sad." Jim Bob said quietly.

"Yes. There was a lot of tragedy in those days. It was a fact of living on the frontier." Grandpa said regretfully.

Enoch was still and silent as he stared at his mother's grave. The sight broke my heart, but a part of me was glad that he was finally able to take this step in his grieving process.

"Well, we'd better be getting back to the house or we'll be facing a modern day tragedy, inflicted by your grandmother for being late for dinner." Grandpa said as he turned to leave.

"You ready?" I whispered to Enoch with concern.

"Yes. I have seen what I needed to." Enoch said as he slowly stood.

There were so many things I wished that I could say or do right then to comfort him, but it just wasn't possible in front of so many people.

"I don't have words big enough to express my gratitude to your family for how they have attended to my family. I would have been grateful to know that their remains had been respectfully inturned. But to attend to their final resting places with such care and reverence is beyond my wildest expectation." Enoch said as he walked at my side.

Had I said anything, I would have drawn the attention of the others, but I had a feeling that Enoch knew what I wanted to say, anyway.

"You know, I've been the keeper of the family history for nearly forty years now. I think it's just about time for me to start training someone in the up-

and-coming generation to take over for me." Grandpa said in a casual tone as we walked.

Even though I've only known my Grandpa for a few days, I already know that I love and respect him more than I ever would have thought possible. That being said, there was no freakin way I wanted him to choose me.

"Jimmy Bob, if you'd be willing, I think you'd be perfect for the job." Grandpa said as he stopped to look Jim Bob in the eyes.

After a moment to consider, Jim Bob quietly said, "But I'm not a James."

Grandpa gave a weary chuckle as he continued walking then said, "I don't know if you've been keeping track of the family, but no one in your generation has the last name 'James'. I suppose it's still possible that your Uncle Petey might have a son to carry on the family name, but so far, his personality has proven to be an effective means of birth control."

I gave Grandpa a quick smile, then looked at Enoch with concern. I was surprised to see that rather than looking depressed, he seemed to have a slight, wistful smile.

"Do you really want me to keep the family history for you?" Jim Bob asked cautiously.

"Not just for me. For the whole family. We need someone to let the next generations know where they came from." Grandpa said seriously.

"I think I'd really like to do it." Jim Bob finally said.

"Good. Then I'll get to work on having the family papers reproduced, so you can have your own copy. It's a good thing that you're just beginning your summer vacation, because we're going to be spending a lot of time touring the family graveyards, so I can show you who's who and tell you their stories." Grandpa said happily.

"That sounds great, Grandpa." Jim Bob said with a sincere smile.

Jim Bob seems to have this whole Cowboy/Goth thing going on, where he always looks gloomy. But on the rare occasion when he smiles, he's actually kinda cute.

* * * * *

Yeah, Grandma was pissed off.

She lined us up and bitched us out, moving up and down the line to be sure that every one of us knew just how inconsiderate we were.

Once we were sufficiently chastised, she hurried away and the rest of us went into the dining room and sat down to have dinner.

Grandma came in a few minutes later with Aunt Alma on her arm. I immediately got up from my place and gave Aunt Alma a hug and a kiss in greeting.

Enoch seemed confused for a moment, but when I called her 'Allie', he realized who she was.

When I went back to my seat, I noticed that Enoch had moved across the room and was striking up a conversation with George.

The dinner conversation around the table was good natured and fun. I guess that Grandma got it all out of her system when we first came in, because she was as pleasant as could be while we were eating.

When the dinner was finally over, Allie asked that I help her back to her room. Of course, as soon as we started walking toward the door, Enoch and George noticed and started following close behind.

Once we were away from the rest of the family, Allie quietly said, "Now I see why you knew about Enoch."

"Yeah. I just didn't know how much to tell you, since I'd only just met you." I admitted shyly.

"It just does my heart good to see George enjoying conversation with someone else after all these years." Allie said tenderly.

"I promise, we'll come and visit as often as we can. I think it does Enoch a lot of good to be able to talk to someone besides me." I said honestly.

"It's in the genes, you know." Allie confided to me as we walked through her doorway.

"What's that?" I asked curiously.

"Being able to speak with the departed. I saw my grandmother do it when I was a child." Allie said frankly as she slowly sat in the armchair by the bed.

"But then, why can't anyone else see Enoch or George?" I asked curiously.

"Not everyone gets the gift. Or, maybe, they don't choose to use it. But I'm glad to see that it's still being passed on. I had hoped that someday one of my children..." Allie trailed off sadly.

I didn't really know what that was about, but I could guess.

"I'm sorry." I whispered.

"No parent should outlive their children. It's not right." Allie said as she firmed up her self control and fought down her tears.

"No. It's not." I agreed.

"As much as I wanted to, I never did see any of their spirits." She said quietly, then added, "George says that it's because they moved on to whatever's next. He chose to stay with me because he didn't want for me to have to be all alone."

"I think that he made a really good choice. And this way, when it's time, you can go and find out what's next together." I said gently.

Allie smiled at me, then said, "Thank you, Mark. That's how we feel, too. It's really nice to have someone that I can talk to about this. Too many people are afraid to even approach the subject."

"Well, I don't know much about it, but not talking about it won't make it go away." I said simply.

She nodded, then added, "And not thinking about it doesn't prepare you for it. From what George tells me, the newly departed sometimes can't make the adjustment and become deranged. He says that it's them that give all ghosts a bad name."

"A few rotten apples..." I said with a smile.

Allie chuckled as she nodded her agreement.

We sat silently for a few minutes, until I finally said, "Enoch and I are going to have to go soon."

"That isn't fair. I haven't even had a chance to speak with him." Allie said in a pouty voice.

"Can you hear him?" I asked curiously.

"No. But George can tell me what he's saying." Allie said seriously.

I turned and smiled when I saw how animatedly Enoch was talking with the formless blur in front of him.

"Enoch, would you and George like to come over here and join us? Allie would like to catch up on old times with you." I asked hopefully.

Both Enoch and George moved over to our side of the room.

"You're looking well, Enoch. Just as I remember you." Allie said fondly.

"It's very good to see you, too, Allie. George has told me some of what your life has been like, and I am happy for you." Enoch said warmly.

"She can't hear you, E. Either George or I will tell her what you said." I told him with a smile.

Taking that as a cue, George relayed the sentiment of what Enoch had said.

Before I knew it, the four of us were having a long conversation about how many things had changed in the world over the years. I have a feeling that being included in a conversation like that is something that few people ever get to experience in their lives. Even though I didn't have much to contribute, I felt incredibly lucky to be a part of it.

* * * * *

"Joe Bob says we need to get going before it gets too late." Beau said as he peeked in through the doorway.

"Come on in here and give your Aunt Alma a hug." Allie said warmly.

Beau slowly stepped forward and as soon as he was within reach, he was engulfed in her arms.

I felt a spark of sympathy for the boy. I've been lured in by her 'frail old lady' routine and lived to tell the tale.

When she finally released him from the hug, I said, "Enoch and I will be there in a minute."

"He knows about Enoch?" Allie asked curiously.

"Yeah. Beau's helped us out a lot today and he hasn't told anyone." I said with a warm smile at him.

"Well, in that case, I suppose it's only right that I introduce you to your Great Great Uncle George." Allie said as she gestured toward her dearly departed husband.

"But I thought you said that 'cause you was crazy." Beau said cautiously as he looked where she indicated.

"We don't know why it works the way it does, but Allie and I can see George and Enoch when other people can't." I said honestly.

Beau thought about that for a moment, then quietly asked, "Where are they?"

"Enoch is right here beside me, and George is beside Allie." I said carefully, hoping that if Beau looked hard enough, that he could see one of them.

When he obviously couldn't, I added, "When I first met George, all I could see of him was a little spot, like a speck of dust floating in the air."

Beau looked around curiously, then suddenly pointed at George and asked, "Is that him, there?"

"That's your Uncle George." I said with a relieved smile.

"Wow! I can really see him! I did it!" Beau said happily.

"Yeah. You did a great job." I chuckled.

"Hi Uncle George! Do you like to play army men?" Beau asked excitedly.

"Why don't you save that for your next visit? Didn't you say that Joe Bob's ready to go?" I asked as I fought to contain my smile.

"Yeah. I guess." Beau reluctantly said.

"Allie, I hope that you and Uncle George have a good night. Enoch and I will visit again as soon as we can." I said gently.

"We'll be happy to see you again as soon and as often as you want to visit." Allie said warmly.

"Joe Bob wants to know if you guys are coming or not." Jim Bob said as he entered the room.

"We're just saying goodbye." I told him, then leaned in to give Allie a kiss on the cheek.

Once I was done, Beau and Jim Bob took their turns.

Much sooner than any of us would have liked, we walked together out of Allie's room.

* * * * *

"Did y'all have a good visit?" Joe Bob asked once we were in the car.

"Yeah. Sorry I didn't come when you sent Beau to get me. We got to talking..." I trailed off with a shrug.

"I suppose it's good that you and Aunt Alma can talk like that. I never had that with her and I suppose a person needs that kind of connection." Joe Bob said introspectively. I got the sense that he felt like he had neglected Allie in some way, by not being closer to her.

"She's just missing her brother, who left home without a backward glance, nearly a hundred years ago. I happen to look like him and I even have his first name, so that's what started us talking." I said simply.

When we got to the gate, Beau jumped out of the car and ran to open it for us.

Once he was back in the car, Joe Bob cautiously said, "I hear that Aunt Alma's been a little off her nut ever since her husband died. She knows you're not her brother, doesn't she?"

I could really appreciate the fact that Joe Bob could ask such a blunt, straight to the point question without it sounding the least bit rude or pushy.

"I think when she saw me, for the first few minutes, that she was confused and thought that I might somehow be him. But after we talked for a few minutes, we got that all sorted out and now she knows who I am." I said confidently, then shared a smile at Enoch who was cuddled close to me, sitting on my lap.

"I feel bad for her, but I don't know what to do." Joe Bob admitted quietly.

"Don't worry about Allie, she's doing fine." I assured him.

* * * * *

The rest of the ride to the house was made in silence.

Every now and then I'd glance over at Beau and find him fighting to stay awake.

Once Joe Bob pulled up in front of the house, he quietly said, "If you want, we could come in and wait with you till your ma gets home."

I laughed goodnaturedly at the suggestion, then said, "She said that she'll be in late. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

After opening the door and helping Enoch to get out of the car before me, I turned to Jim Bob and asked, "Are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah. I got this." Jim Bob said in a low voice.

I nodded at him, then started to climb out of the back seat of the car.

"Keep a watch out for low flying snakes." Joe Bob said to me with a grin.

"Yeah. I'll do that." I chuckled.

Enoch and I walked up the steps to the front porch, then turned and watched as my cousins drove away.

Living in Michigan all my life, I'd never had much contact with family before. Every now and then we'd get together with some of my dad's relatives, usually when someone was born or died, but we never really had any relationship with them. Somehow, it made me sad to think about what I might have missed out on. Then again, it's possible that they're horrible people and that my parents kept their distance for very good reasons. I guess I'll have to figure that out someday.

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Once we were safely back in our bedroom, Enoch and I sat on the bed, resting back against the pillows on the headboard, and held each other for a few long silent minutes.

When Enoch made a movement, I thought it might be an indication that he was finally ready to talk, but no. He moved from my side and settled in on top of me, then proceeded to kiss me like I've never been kissed before.

And I let him.

I've never been the object of someone's affection before.

I highly recommend it.

* * * * *

When Enoch eventually settled back at my side to cuddle with me, he quietly said, "Today was filled with so many incredible things, many of which, I didn't understand. But it was amazing to accompany you."

"You didn't just accompany me. You helped me and helped my... our family." I said seriously.

Enoch didn't seem to agree with my statement, and I felt that it was important that he understand.

"When I nearly stepped on that snake, you protected me. You saved my life." I said simply.

I could feel Enoch's reluctant nod on my shoulder.

"When we went to Lonny's house, you helped me to figure out Jim Bob's problem, then helped me to help him." I said seriously.

After a moment, Enoch nodded again.

"You were there with me, watching and helping every step of the way. Sometimes, even if you didn't do anything, just me knowing that you were

there helped me to be more confident or reminded me to make an extra effort to try and do the right thing." I explained carefully.

"I heard what you told Beau about the blood test that you took, but I don't really understand." Enoch said quietly.

"There's a disease that you can get from having unprotected sex." I began to explain carefully.

"Like the syphilis?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Yes. Something like that. Except that now we have antibiotics that can cure syphilis. So far, there's no cure for HIV." I said informatively.

"And you're afraid that Jim Bob has that?" Enoch asked in a whisper.

"No. I really don't think that he does. But he did the things that you need to do to catch it, so it would be stupid for us to not even check for it." I said seriously.

"And you took that test, just so Jim Bob wouldn't have to do it alone?" Enoch asked hesitantly.

"That's right. I've fooled around with a couple guys, back home, but I've never done anything unsafe. I just thought that Jim Bob might be more comfortable if he weren't the only one being tested." I finished with a smile.

"Today has been so incredible. To find out that Marshall James considered me to be like a son to him... I suppose that I should have been able to see that, based on his actions. I was blinded by losing Mark... the other one." Enoch finished as he cuddled closer to me.

"That just makes you more a part of my family." I said as I returned the cuddle.

"I just want to tell you again how much I appreciate how much trouble you and Beau went to so that I could visit my mother's grave." Enoch said in a peaceful whisper.

"We were happy to do it, E." I said as I felt myself starting to drift into sleep.

* * * * *

A noise woke me.

Before I even opened my eyes, I was aware of Enoch, still at my side.

Another noise, the sound of a door closing, kept me from drifting back to sleep.

"Mom must be home." I said as I slowly started to get out of bed.

"Do you want for me to go with you?" Enoch asked curiously.

"No. I'm just going to see how her interview went, then I'll be right back." I said to him with a smile.

Enoch returned the smile and watched as I left.

* * * * *

"I didn't expect for you to be up this late." My mom said when she spotted me on the stairs.

"I wasn't. I just kind of fell asleep and never changed for bed." I said sheepishly, then quickly asked, "How did your interview go?"

"I was probably the most nervous that I've ever been, but I think it went very well. One of the other candidates already asked not to be considered for the job. She said that she couldn't bear to leave her 'Church Family'." Mom finished with an eyeroll.

I smiled at her expression and waited expectantly for more.

"The other person in the interview seemed to have been born with no personality whatsoever. If they look at the job as being primarily focused on dealing with numbers and computers, then he has the college degrees and experience that he needs to be a shoo in for the job. But if the powers that be take into account that he may have to deal with clients, then I may really have a shot at this." Mom said happily.

"That sounds great. I'm glad it went well for you." I said sincerely.

"Right now, it's about a one in a hundred chance that I'll be considered, but this morning it was a one in a million, so I'm feeling pretty good about it." Mom said with a smile, then asked, "How was your day with your cousins?"

"I had a good time." I said simply.

"I'm so glad. Well, I'm beat. I'll see you in the morning." Mom said before heading up the stairs.

I followed more slowly as I began to consider what her 'good news' meant to me.

Chapter 10: A Gift for Rigel

While I suppose that waking up with Enoch at my side was a relatively new sensation, somehow I couldn't imagine waking up any other way. Not that I'd want to.

I don't really have a word for the feeling. Possession? Inclusion? Belonging?

All of the above, I guess.

It just feels like there's been something missing from my life for a very long time and I never knew what it was. There was an undefinable sadness or emptiness that I carried with me, but since I'd never had it filled, I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Now that Enoch is here... well, almost here. As here as he can be, anyway. Whatever. As hokey as it sounds, he completes me.

"Did you sleep well?" Enoch asked in his adorable 'proper' accent. The sound of it was enough to make me fall in love with him all over again.

"Yeah. I slept great. How are you, this morning?" I asked from a cocoon of warmth and security.

"Very well, although I will admit that I am a bit concerned about the news your mother imparted last evening." Enoch said honestly.

"I should probably be rooting for her to get the job, just because she's my mom and I want her to be happy. But I really, seriously, want them to call her back and tell her that they hired someone else."

"Yes. I believe that would make our lives much easier." Enoch said with a lazy, loving smile at me.

"Well, she might be a grumpy bitch for a few days, *that* won't be easy. But she'll eventually get over it." I said simply.

"I am bothered when you use that term in reference to your mother. It seems disrespectful and she is your closest family." Enoch said quietly.

I thought about it for a moment then said, "Yeah. That's probably wrong of me. I'll try not to say that."

"Please, do not think that I am telling you how you should behave. I simply wanted to voice my discomfort, so that you will know what I am feeling."

Enoch said frankly.

"I understand, E. And you're right. It's disrespectful and wrong for me to talk about my mom like that. She hasn't done anything to deserve it. She's just trying to get a job and get us on our feet again." I said honestly.

Enoch smiled at my words, then moved in to give me a full, deep kiss.

{How did I ever get through a day of my life without this?} I thought to myself in wonder at the exquisite sensation.

* * * * *

The kiss went on for... I don't know. However long it was, it wasn't long enough. But since I've been cursed with certain biological needs, I eventually had to get out of my nice warm incredibly comfy bed and go out into the cold cruel world.

Mom was up.

Actually 'up' doesn't adequately describe what I witnessed when I walked into the kitchen.

'Hummingbird on crack' was a little closer to the mark.

She was flitting around, humming to herself, putting together a fairly complicated breakfast menu.

Although it's nice to see her happy, if this keeps up, I might talk to her about getting her meds adjusted. I really don't know if she's taking anything, but it's worth looking into.

"Good morning! How did you sleep?" Mom asked me delightedly.

"Okay." I said cautiously.

"Breakfast will be ready in just a minute. I made blueberry pancakes, bacon and eggs." She said happily.

"It smells great." I said honestly, then thought to ask, "Why are you cooking breakfast for us?"

"I like to cook when I'm happy!" She announced joyfully.

"So, does this mean that you've been clinically depressed since before I was born?" I asked cautiously.

She laughed at the question, then moved away from the stove long enough to give me a quick, joyful hug.

Freaky.

That's all I'm saying.

* * * * *

Once Mom finally sat down at the table to eat with me, I cautiously asked, "Do you think we're going to move to New Mexico?"

"I don't know about that. There's still too many things that can go wrong for me to make any plans. But while I was in Santa Fe, I *did* pick up a few magazines and newspapers, to get a feel for what's available to rent and the price range that we'd be looking at... you know, if things were to go that way." Mom said happily.

Yeah. That figures.

The one time Mom gets all happy and house-wifey, and I lose my appetite. The best that I could do was nibble, after that.

A sense of dread had firm hold of me and I couldn't enjoy what I'm sure was an absolutely wonderful meal.

I sat like that for a few minutes, poking and prodding my food as my mind whirled.

Finally, when I couldn't stand it anymore, I quietly said, "I really like it here. I don't want to leave."

"I'm glad you like Texas. I was afraid that you were going to be miserable. But if you'll give it a chance, maybe you'll like New Mexico, too." She said cheerfully.

"It won't be the same. I've found a place where I feel like I belong and where I want to stay. I don't want to give that up." I said seriously.

Mom seemed to think it over, or maybe she was just pausing for dramatic effect. Either way, she finally looked me in the eyes and said, in no uncertain terms, "If I get the job, we're moving."

* * * * *

I stuffed the rest of the breakfast down my face. I'm sure it probably tasted good. I really couldn't tell you.

As soon as I was done, I went back to the perceived safety and serenity of my bedroom.

I didn't even bother with thinking about it. As soon as I was in the door, I climbed into the bed and closed my eyes.

Enoch could tell that I was upset and listened carefully when I told him what my mom had said.

Although he didn't say as much, I could tell that he was as disappointed as I was in the turn of events.

It took me some time to work up to it, but I finally said, "I guess since we were able to take you to the graveyard and drive all over the place yesterday, that there isn't any reason that you couldn't go to New Mexico with us."

"Every time I leave this room, I face the prospect of finding myself somewhere that I will not be able to return from." Enoch said quietly.

Even though the statement seemed on the surface to be somewhat obvious, I could sense the emotions that boiled underneath it. What he hadn't said was that the only reason he had been able to leave the room was because I was there with him, encouraging him, every step of the way.

"Beyond that, the doorway is here. If I leave, I may never have the opportunity to return to the world of the living." Enoch said urgently.

I nodded that I understood what he was saying but had no rebuttal for that.

"Please, do not force me to make that choice." Enoch begged me.

Although it's possible that the words could be taken as an ultimatum, I got the feeling that he didn't mean it that way.

He was simply asking me... begging me... not to put him in the position where he would have to choose.

As much as I would have liked to have promised him that I wouldn't, I already knew that it was a promise that I couldn't keep.

Too many things were outside of my control.

"Perhaps we should look at the rift to see if it has enlarged." Enoch suggested quietly.

I immediately turned toward the mirror.

"Not here. This is a dream, based on my perception." Enoch cautioned.

It took me a moment, but I finally realized what he was saying and forced myself to leave the safety and security of our shared dream.

* * * * *

Once I was fully awake, I walked across the room to examine the mirror, standing in the corner.

The flaw in the glass was there.

It might have been my wishful thinking that made it seem larger than it was the day before.

"It is possible that it will open enough that I can pass through before your mother has decided that you need to leave." Enoch said quietly.

It was barely more than a sliver.

Hoping that it would open in time wouldn't be any more productive than wishing that my mom didn't get the job.

Either or both could conceivably happen, but there was nothing I could do to make either outcome more likely.

In the end, we went back to the bed and returned to our dream place where we could hold each other.

* * * * *

I was jolted out of our dream when Mom called to tell me that lunch was ready.

After a quick kiss and cuddle, I went downstairs and did what I had to do.

I'm sure that Mom could tell that I was depressed. I mean, I wasn't trying to hide it. But she didn't interrogate me about it. I guess we both knew why I was in that mood and neither one of us had anything to add to what had already been said.

As soon as I was done eating, I returned to my room and went immediately back to my bed. There was nowhere else that I wanted to be and there was nothing more that I wanted to be doing.

* * * * *

"Mark! You've got company!" Mom screeched from downstairs.

Since time passes differently inside the dream, I wasn't sure how much time had passed in the real world.

When I opened my eyes, I was surprised to find that it was still daylight. Of course, being in Texas in the summertime, it was light until almost nine at night, so that didn't really tell me much.

"Let me go see what's up. I'll be back as soon as I can." I told Enoch as I stood.

"Do you want for me to go with you?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"No. I'll find an excuse to come back up here and get you if it's something you can be involved in." I said reassuringly.

Enoch nodded, and seemed to be relieved that he wouldn't have to leave the safety and security of his 'familiar' surroundings.

After making sure that I was presentable, I gave Enoch a quick kiss before leaving the room.

* * * * *

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I noticed that Joe Bob Jr, Jim Bob, Beau and a young man that I didn't know were standing there, waiting for me.

"What's up?" I asked casually.

"While I was working today, I got to thinking about things and... Mark, this is Greg. He works with me." Joe Bob said uncomfortably.

"Hi." I said to the stranger.

"Hi, Mark." The man said timidly.

Two words was all it took. My gaydar buried the needle.

"I brought my army men. Can I go play?" Beau asked hopefully as he held up his gallon zip-lock bag as evidence.

I smiled at the question and said, "Sure. You can go on up to my room, if you want."

Beau didn't wait for his brother's permission or approval. He was off like a shot, up the stairs.

"Jim Bob, why don't you take Greg outside and show him around the place? I need to talk to Mark for a minute." Joe Bob asked his younger brother seriously.

"Yeah." Jim Bob said stoically, then turned to Greg and said, "Come on."

* * * * *

Once we were alone, Joe Bob led us into the living room before saying, "A while back, a few months ago, Greg... I don't know if I should tell you. It seems wrong."

"He's gay, I can tell. So, what did he do? Hit on you or something like that?" I asked simply.

"Yeah. I told him 'no'. But ever since then, I don't know, I get the feeling like he's still hoping that I'll change my mind and I thought that maybe you might be able to... do something. I really like him but now I'm always afraid that I'll say or do the wrong thing and get his hopes up." Joe Bob said in anguish.

"I can talk to him. I can't really promise more than that." I said honestly.

"He's kinda quiet and standoffish. I don't know if he has any other friends at all." Joe Bob said seriously.

"You can't just choose to be friends with someone because of that. It's like emotional blackmail and it's nothing to base a friendship on." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

"Yeah. But it's not like that. He really *is* my friend and I want for him to keep on being my friend... if we can just get past this one thing. That's why I brought him over here." Joe Bob said frankly.

"I got it, Joe Bob. Just work it out so that we can have a few minutes to talk and I'll see what I can do." I assured him.

"Thanks, Mark. I know it's a weird thing to ask of you. And I won't ask again. I promise. I just don't want to lose him as a friend." Joe Bob quietly explained.

"I understand. And whatever happens is going to be up to him. I really don't have any control over that. But I'll do as much as I can."

"Thanks." Joe Bob said before leaving the room.

For just a moment, I wished that Enoch were there with me, but I knew that he was upstairs playing with Beau. After the serious morning we'd had, it was probably just what he needed to lift his spirits.

* * * * *

"Why don't you go ahead and sit down in here. I'll go get us something to drink." Joe Bob said from the doorway as he ushered Greg into the living room.

"Alright." Greg said cautiously as he walked in and did as he had been instructed.

"So, you work with Joe Bob, right?" I asked curiously.

"Yeah." Greg said hesitantly.

Great. Where do I go from here? How do I talk to someone about something so personal?

"Joe Bob found out that I was gay a couple days ago." I said simply. As opening lines go, it wasn't one of my best, but at least it *might* nudge the conversation in the right direction.

"Is that why Joe Bob asked me out here?" Greg asked anxiously.

"Yeah. I guess that he thought that I could talk to you about some stuff, you know, one 'gay' to another." I said as I tried to sound as casual and nonthreatening as possible.

"Why couldn't he just talk to me about it, himself?" Greg asked cautiously.

"Because he doesn't want to take the chance of hurting you, I guess." I answered honestly.

"Oh. Does this mean that he asked you to tell me that he doesn't want to be my friend anymore?" Greg asked quietly.

"Just the opposite, actually." I said frankly.

"Huh?" Greg asked in confusion.

"He wants to keep being your friend, he's just afraid that he might say something or do something to get your hopes up and end up hurting you." I said seriously.

"It's never going to happen, is it?" Greg asked dejectedly.

"If you mean Joe Bob with his pants around his ankles and you on your knees... no. Probably not. He's as straight as any straight guy I've ever met. But if you can just let go of that expectation, he wants to continue to be your friend and spend time with you." I said cautiously.

"Are you sure?" Greg asked uncertainly.

"That's why he brought you out here. If he didn't care about your feelings or didn't want to continue to be your friend, he wouldn't have gone to the trouble. He would've just told you off or stopped talking to you or something." I said frankly.

"But he's so sweet and nice and... beautiful." Greg said in a conflicted tone.

"Yeah. No straight guy should ever be that cute." I said wearily.

Greg nodded his agreement.

"But there's worse things than having a really close, good friend who's adorable." I said with an encouraging smile.

"Yeah. I guess." Greg reluctantly admitted.

"Who knows? Maybe another guy will show up and fall under his spell and you can be there to tell him the facts." I said slowly.

"Are you saying that I should go after his castoffs?" Greg asked reluctantly.

"I was thinking more of looking at Joe Bob as 'bait'." I said with a smile.

"'USDA Prime' bait." Greg said with a grin.

"Is sweet tea alright with y'all?" Joe Bob asked as he walked into the living room.

"Yeah. Great." I said gratefully as I accepted a glass from him.

After a moment, Greg looked up at Joe Bob and quietly said, "Sounds good."

* * * * *

We sat in awkward silence for a moment, when I noticed Jim Bob standing in the doorway. He didn't look like he wanted to join in. It seemed more like he was waiting for something to happen.

I took a long drink of my sweet tea, then turned to Jim Bob and said, "The only thing I've seen around here is the graveyard. Would you like to give me the grand tour?"

"Yeah. Sure." Jim Bob said with surprise.

"If you guys will excuse us, I'm going to explore my new home." I said as I stood and walked to the door.

Before leaving, I turned with a grin and said, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Greg laughed at the comment as Joe Bob's eyes went wide.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Jim Bob?" I asked as we stepped outside into the blazing, searing, hellfire heat.

"I've been thinking." Jim Bob said seriously.

"I bet." I said casually as we slowly walked.

"I'm not supposed to be able to read or speak well or even think." Jim Bob said distantly.

"Why not?" I asked curiously.

"Because of my family. Everyone looks down on us and sees a bunch of redneck hicks." Jim Bob said quietly.

"Yeah. When people find out that I'm gay they think that I want to wear dresses or be a girl or something. If it's someone whose opinion that I worry about, I'll explain it. But most of the time it's easier to just let them think what they want to think." I said frankly.

"The kids at school will sometimes tease me and snicker about my family being poor or living in a trailer. Sometimes they'll accuse us of putting on an act, pretending like we're stereotype Texans." Jim Bob continued thoughtfully.

I realized that in that moment what Jim Bob needed was someone to listen to him. So I simply nodded my acknowledgement of what he was saying.

"My problem is that half the time I feel like I'm not like the rest of my family. The rest of the time I feel like maybe Ma and Pa are ashamed of me and think I'm acting like something I'm not. The real trouble is, I don't know what I am." Jim Bob said distantly.

"Your parents aren't ashamed of you. I bet that they're as proud of you as they can be." I said reassuringly.

"I know that they're proud of Joe Bob and his job. They're talking about it all the time." Jim Bob said as he stopped and looked me in the eyes.

"If I were going to guess, I'd say that even though they're probably proud of you, too, they may not know exactly how to relate to you. You're interested in things that they don't know about or don't understand. Because of that, they can't really express their pride as easily with you as they can with Joe Bob." I said thoughtfully.

"Maybe." Jim Bob said slowly, then continued, "I guess it'd be like me going to a rodeo. Even though I could see that they did something really difficult and amazing, I wouldn't *know* what they accomplished because I've never done anything even close to that before."

"Yeah. I think that's it, exactly." I said with a smile.

"Thanks, Mark. It's nice to have someone that I can talk to about this stuff. Even if you didn't have any answers, it'd just be nice to know that there's someone who'll listen." Jim Bob said distantly.

"It's nice for me, too. Back home, no one ever really talked to me about anything important. Everyone around me was going through the same things that I was. We all had the same questions and had already come up with the same answers. So there wasn't any reason to talk much about it except to bitch and whine to each other. Being here, in a different place, I guess I have a unique perspective." I said consideringly.

"Well, I'm glad you're here." Jim Bob said with a smile.

"So am I."

* * * * *

After the walk around the outside of the house, I actually didn't know any more about the property than when we had left. But the conversation with Jim Bob was nice and I felt good about it.

As soon as we were back inside, I went upstairs to check on Beau and Enoch.

When I walked into my bedroom, I couldn't help but smile at the sight of the two of them, sitting on opposite ends of my bed with the blankets rumpled to make hills and valleys for their soldiers.

"How are you guys doing?" I asked as I stopped just inside the door.

"I can see Enoch, now! This is awesome!" Beau said happily.

"How was your visit with your cousins?" Enoch asked curiously.

"What did he say? I still can't hear him." Beau asked quickly.

"Enoch just asked me how my visit was going." I said with a smile at Beau, then turned to Enoch and answered, "Everything's fine. We had a good talk."

"Boys! Dinner's ready!" Mom called from downstairs.

"Come on, Beau. You don't want to miss dinner, do you?" I asked with a smile.

"Can I come back up and play after dinner?" Beau asked hopefully.

"That's really up to Joe Bob, but I don't have a problem with it." I said frankly.

It was obvious that Beau was reluctant, but he finally got up from the bed and joined me at the door.

"We'll be back up as soon as we can. I love you, E." I said quietly.

"I love you as well, Mark." Enoch said warmly as he looked me in the eyes.

* * * * *

"We didn't come over here for you to feed us. I just stopped by to talk to Mark after I got off work." I heard Joe Bob explaining as Beau and I walked into the kitchen.

"Listen. You're family and we don't get a lot of company over here. I already made the food. You don't want it to go to waste, do you?" Mom asked firmly.

"No, Ma'am." Joe Bob reluctantly admitted.

"Good. Then sit down." Mom said happily.

Joe Bob then turned to look at me before saying, "Here, all this time, I thought it was just my ma who did that."

I laughed sympathetically as I took my seat.

* * * * *

The food was good.

The dinner conversation... not so much.

It was uncomfortable, to say the least.

Even though I know that my mom would be cool about it, it wasn't my place to 'out' Jim Bob or Greg, so that subject was off the table.

Enoch was another subject that couldn't be discussed.

What that left was general chit-chat that no one was comfortable with. Everyone was walking on eggshells, afraid to say much of anything because it might unwittingly divulge someone's secret.

We all carried on, dutifully doing our best to make it not seem as awkward and uncomfortable as we all knew it was.

Thanks to the time I've spent with Enoch in the dream world, I'm familiar with the concept of time moving differently in different circumstances.

That dinner took FOREVER.

* * * * *

We survived.

Everyone ate their fill and we were all more than ready to move on to whatever was next.

"Can I go back upstairs and play?" Beau asked hopefully.

"We gotta get home. Ma and Pa need us there to watch the young'uns so they can go out." Joe Bob said frankly.

"Yeah. I forgot." Beau said dejectedly.

"Don't worry, Beau. You'll still be able to come over some other time." I said with a smile at him.

"Yeah." Beau agreed half-heartedly, then turned to Joe Bob and said, "I need to go upstairs and get my army men."

"Go on, then. We still need to drive Greg back over to his car, too." Joe Bob said seriously.

Beau didn't argue, but wasn't moving at his top speed as he went up the stairs.

We stood around in the grand entry hall, looking at each other in silence.

Finally, Greg turned to me and quietly said, "Thanks for what you said, Mark."

"I hope it helped." I said sincerely.

Greg glanced at Joe Bob, then said, "Yeah. It did. We're good."

I smiled at the announcement, then looked at Jim Bob with question.

He smiled his response.

"Just remember to stop by anytime, even if it's just to hang out and talk." I said slowly.

Before much else could be said, Beau hurried down the stairs with his zip-lock bag in hand.

"All of you, make sure you come back as soon as you can." I said seriously.

"Yeah! Don't worry. I'll keep on asking!" Beau assured me.

I smiled at him, having no doubt that he would.

* * * * *

Once everyone was gone, I made my way back upstairs and was happy when I had my bedroom door securely closed behind me.

"How are you doing, E?" I asked as I automatically started taking off my shoes.

"I had a good visit with Beau. Even though he can't hear what I am saying, he talks enough for both of us." Enoch said warmly.

"I'm glad to hear that." I said with a smile.

"What was your visit about? I got the feeling that you would rather not talk about it with Beau in the room." Enoch asked with concern.

"Oh, it wasn't anything terrible. I just didn't want to discuss anyone else's personal business in front of him." I said honestly.

"Good. I was afraid that it was more bad news." Enoch said frankly.

"It does seem to be the day for it but, no. It wasn't anything bad. In fact, it was kind of nice. Joe Bob and Jim Bob both came to me, asking for my help with different things. I've never really had that before. I kinda like it." I said thoughtfully.

"You are a very level headed person. I can understand why someone would come to you with their troubles." Enoch said warmly.

"But who do I go to with *my* troubles?" I asked in a leading tone.

"Me?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Yeah." I confirmed, then announced, "I'm going to go ahead and shower now and get ready for bed."

"If you just had dinner, isn't it still early?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's still light out. But I've had enough of the waking world for one day. I think I'd like to spend the rest of the night with you." I said honestly.

"I believe that I would like that, very much." Enoch responded with a smile.

Chapter 11: Eleven-Eleven

11:11am.

The time caught my attention and I flashed back to the time and temperature the day we arrived.

Exactly one week had passed since our arrival in Texas.

As I thought about that, I realized that It seemed like so much longer.

Of course, waiting to hear about Mom's job caused it to drag out, filling each minute with anxiety and dread.

Waiting for the fracture to open so Enoch could get through hasn't made it move any faster, either.

On the other hand, Enoch and I spent the majority of the time since Thursday, when Joe Bob and his brothers had visited, in a dream state together, so that sort of balanced things out.

But fast or slow, wanted or not, Monday arrived, right on schedule.

* * * * *

"Try to cheer up." My mom said as she drove.

"I don't want to leave." I said simply. There's no reason for me to give a long, drawn out speech. I know what I'm feeling. She knows what I'm feeling. All that's left is to remind her that I haven't changed my mind.

"We don't always get what we want." Mom said simply.

Yeah, that's the motherly wisdom that I've come to depend on. I glanced into the back seat where Enoch was watching and gave a slight eyeroll to show how impressed I wasn't.

"Well, if you can't be happy, at least try not to rain on everyone else's parade. This is a big day for Emmylou." Mom continued on.

"Yeah. I'll keep a lid on it." I muttered despondently.

"Get ready to jump out. The gate's up ahead." Mom said suddenly.

{I know where the gate is!} I thought to myself irritably. I hate being so crabby about every little thing. It's not me. But I can't help it.

As she pulled to a stop, I hopped out of the car and ran ahead to open the gate for her.

Even though it was almost noon, the heat wasn't nearly as bad as usual. The sky was slightly overcast, although from the look of it the possibility of rain was somewhere between slim and none.

As soon as Mom drove through the gate, I closed it behind her, then hurried to get back into the car.

Considering the pissy mood that I've been in lately, I suppose I wouldn't blame her if she decided to drive off without me. I kind of deserve it.

* * * * *

Of course, Grandpa and Grandma were happy to see us, welcoming us with open arms.

The underlying anxiety and sadness that I was carrying didn't go away, but the smiles and hugs that I gave them weren't *entirely* an act.

As soon as that was done, I made a point of announcing that I needed to go back and say 'Hello' to Allie.

The fact of the matter was that I needed to guide Enoch back to her room so that he could visit with Allie and George.

Mom seemed a little bit put out that I didn't immediately 'stand to' and start helping with decorating for the impending birthday party.

Too bad.

Doing things to please her isn't really way up high on my list at the moment.

I might have lingered back in Allie's bedroom a little longer than was absolutely necessary, but it was nice to see Enoch having the opportunity to talk to someone besides me. And, I have to admit, visiting with Allie and George was nice for me, too. They're good company.

* * * * *

When I finally returned to the living room, there was an entire list of things already planned for me to do. Most of them had to do with lifting, standing on a ladder, and stretching.

No big deal.

I figured that if I just kept on working and kept my mouth shut, that I'd be able to make it through this thing.

About fifteen minutes into hanging the banners and garlands for Emmylou's birthday circus, the sound of Mom's cell phone caught my attention.

An almost paralyzing feeling of dread swept over me at the sound.

Right then, right there, standing on a ladder in my grandparent's living room, all I wanted to do was break down and cry.

With agonizing slowness, Mom excavated the depths of her purse trying to find her cellphone.

It took me a moment to realize that I had frozen in mid motion. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to slowly back my way down the ladder while Mom answered the phone.

Mom had a puzzled look on her face, then she looked at me and said, "It's for you. Someone named Boyce. He asked for you by name."

"Oh! Good!" I said as I put down the decorations that I had been intending to hang and accepted the phone from her.

She looked at me curiously, almost willing me to explain to her who 'Boyce' was.

I'm not ashamed.

I have no reason not to tell her... except, maybe, to piss her off.

That's reason enough for me.

So I took her cellphone and stepped out of the living room and out to the covered porch at the front of the house, so I could take the call in private.

* * * * *

"Hello, Boyce?" I asked cautiously.

"*Am I speaking to Mark or James?*" Boyce asked carefully.

"Yes. This is Mark."

"*I just called to let you know that your test results have arrived.*" Boyce said seriously.

"Okay. Is everything alright?" I asked hopefully.

"*We don't give out test results over the phone. I just wanted to let you know that the results are in, so that you can make arrangements to stop by, whenever you have the time.*" Boyce said professionally.

"Oh? Okay. That shouldn't be a problem." I said as I thought about how I could arrange that.

"Good." Boyce said happily, then asked, "*Can I speak to James, if he's there? He has this same number listed as a contact number.*"

"He's not here right now, but he'll be here in an hour or so. I can tell him then." I said seriously.

"*I'd appreciate that. If I don't see or hear from you in the next few days, expect for me to call back.*" Boyce said frankly.

"Yeah. We can probably get a ride in, tomorrow. But I won't know until I talk to my cousin about it." I told him casually, then continued, "Either way, I'll pass on the message to Jim Bob when he gets here."

"Thank you. *I'll see you then.*" Boyce said warmly.

"Bye." I said, then hung up the phone.

I took a moment to look at the barren, desolate landscape under the slightly overcast sky.

After growing up in lush, verdant green, it was a definite contrast. But there was no doubt that it had it's own dark, almost violent, beauty.

Finally, when I couldn't put it off any longer, I went back inside the house to continue my afternoon of lifting, climbing and stretching.

* * * * *

I don't know if they go to this much trouble for everyone's birthday, but they sure seemed to be going all out for Emmylou.

I was surprised to find that after all the banners, garlands and streamers had been put up all around the room, they had another 'treat' in store for me. I got the singular honor of blowing up balloons!

Lots and lots of balloons.

I mean, yeah. It makes sense. I wouldn't expect Grandpa to do it. Grandma and Mom were busy in the kitchen probably cooking enough food for an army... and considering Joe Bob's family... um, yeah.

So it was left to me to blow up two or three dozen balloons. I *can't* narrow it down any closer than that. Things got really fuzzy there, for a while.

* * * * *

So, as I was sitting there, trying to recover my breath, looking over my handiwork, I once again heard Mom's cellphone ringing.

I felt a little surge of panic at the sound but, honestly, I didn't have the energy at that point for much more.

I remained seated and listened as carefully as I could for her side of the conversation.

The most that I could do is hear that she was talking, but I couldn't make out a single thing that she was saying. That is, until the 'shriek' erupted.

With that singular ear piercing, cringe inducing sound, I felt my heart sink.

I was sitting there, stewing in my anguish, waiting for her to come in and happily announce what I had already been able to deduce.

"I got the job!" Mom called out joyfully.

Fortunately, she was talking to Grandma or Grandpa when she said it, so I was free to escape down the hallway... to Enoch.

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" Enoch asked as soon as he saw me.

"My mom got the job." I said as I fought to contain my tears.

"Maybe it's not as bad as you're thinking." Allie offered half-heartedly.

"You're right. It may be worse." I said as I lost the battle and felt one of my tears falling down my cheek.

I was never as thankful as I was in that moment for Enoch's ability to give me a 'real' hug.

I felt as if my world were slipping away from me. Everything that I wanted and everything that I loved was on the verge of being taken away.

Enoch pulled away enough to look me in the eyes and calmly said, "We'll find a way. I promise."

I knew the situation we were in. I was very aware of reality. And yet, against all reason, I believed him.

* * * * *

I stayed there, in Allie's room for a while longer, until a ruckus rose up in the living room.

Mom was right about one thing, it wouldn't be fair for me to ruin Emmylou's special day. So it was time for me to put on a happy face and do my duty as a member of the family, even though my heart was breaking.

As I walked into the living room, with Allie on my arm, it was immediately apparent that Emmylou was the center of attention.

From the look of the dress that she was wearing, it was obvious that it was the new dress that she had been promised.

She looked absolutely lovely.

If it weren't for the slightest trace of 'baby fat' that was still rounding out her face, it would be impossible to distinguish her from an eighteen year old.

The bodice of the dress framed her ample endowments to their fullest.

In that moment, I decided that Joe Bob had his work cut out for him. If he wasn't very VERY careful, he was going to be a grandfather long before he was ready for it.

When she noticed me, I dutifully said, "Happy Birthday, Emmylou."

"Thanks." She tittered demurely.

Although she was acting shy at the moment, I could tell that she was thoroughly enjoying all the attention.

"We've got some more good news!" Grandpa announced, drawing everyone's attention. "Patsy just got word that she's been hired. So we have even more reason to celebrate!"

Cheers and well wishes flew around the room while I did my best to keep a smile frozen on my face.

When I noticed that Joe Bob Sr seemed to be struggling with a baby carrier, I hurried over to him and offered to help.

Their youngest, Garth, was somehow fast asleep.

Although he looked to be comfortable enough, it appeared to me that the baby carrier was a size or two too small for him. His head rested right at one end and his legs draped out over the other.

The twin girls were running around, making an ungodly amount of noise, caught up in the festive atmosphere.

The whole thing was nothing short of a circus.

When I spotted Jim Bob, standing off to the side, I made my way over to him and quietly said, "I got a call from the LGBT resource center. Our test results are in."

"What did they say?" Jim Bob asked nervously.

"They said that we'll need to go in and talk to them to get the results." I said honestly.

"Does that mean that there's something wrong?" Jim Bob asked in panic.

"No. It means that they don't give results out over the phone." I assured him, then added, "That's what they always do. It's nothing to worry about. I promise."

It took a moment, but Jim Bob finally seemed to accept my words.

"Do you think that Joe Bob could drive us into town tomorrow?" I asked cautiously.

"I think he has to work, but I'll ask him." Jim Bob said quietly.

"Well, if he can't, we can just wait until he has time. Like I said, it's nothing to worry about." I said to him with a sincere smile. It's possible that that was the first honest smile that I'd had all day.

"I talked to Lonny, yesterday." Jim Bob said quietly.

That surprised me, and I couldn't help but ask, "What did he have to say?"

"He said that he was sorry." Jim Bob said as he looked away.

"Do you believe him?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Jim Bob reluctantly admitted, then added, "I still don't ever want to see him again, but I told him that I forgive him and that I'm not mad."

"Good. Holding on to the hate doesn't help you or anyone else." I said gently.

"I miss the way he used to hold me after we, um... you know." Jim Bob admitted shyly.

"I know. But one of these days you'll find someone else. And hopefully, the next guy will be someone that wants you just the way you are, not because you remind him of someone else." I said honestly.

Yeah, it might not have been the most sensitive thing to say, but I thought it was important to remind Jim Bob why being with Lonny was a really bad idea.

"How can I find someone like that?" Jim Bob asked helplessly.

"Right now, just work on taking care of yourself. It's too soon to be looking for someone else. When you're feeling like this, it's really easy to make bad decisions. It's called a 'rebound', and it's not something to mess with." I said frankly.

"Yeah. You're probably right." Jim Bob reluctantly admitted, then quietly added, "I just feel so alone."

Having visited Jim Bob's house, it was hard for me to imagine anyone feeling 'alone' in a place like that. But I understood what he meant, anyway.

"I know it doesn't feel like it, now. But every day it should get a little bit easier." I told him reassuringly.

"Have you ever been through something like this?" Jim Bob asked curiously.

"No. Not even close." I reluctantly admitted.

I couldn't resist his inquiring gaze and finally continued, "I'm just telling you what I've heard from other people who've been through things."

Jim Bob thought about it for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

Mom's excited voice caught my attention as she was telling Joe Bob and Lindie, "I'm going to have to fly to Santa Fe tomorrow to 'process in'."

I felt another wave of dread overtake me at the announcement.

"Depending on how long that takes, I'm hoping that I'll have time to check out a few places and maybe find us a place to rent." Mom happily continued.

"You're leaving?" Jim Bob asked suddenly.

"It looks that way." I said quietly, unable to maintain a pleasant expression.

"But you just got here." Jim Bob said disappointedly.

"I know." I said as I, once again, had to fight down my tears.

* * * * *

The birthday party went on and on.

I did my best not to rain on anyone's parade, but I could only do so much.

At one point, Jim Bob pulled me aside and told me that Joe Bob had volunteered to drive us to the LGBT resource center the following

afternoon, when he got off work.

The party seemed to drag on and on, until Grandma finally made the announcement that the food was ready.

I sat at dinner, with everyone else, but didn't participate in the conversation.

Throughout, Enoch was standing with George, across the table from me, right behind Allie.

That helped a little.

Whenever I would feel the despair creeping up on me, I'd look at him and reassure myself that we'd find some way to make it work out.

Although, it was becoming increasingly difficult to imagine 'how'.

* * * * *

After dinner, there was the ceremonial presentation of the birthday cake, followed by the obligatory opening of presents.

I suppose that watching Emmylou's happiness did serve to take the edge off of my despair.

I found myself watching, almost wistfully, remembering happier, more carefree times in my life.

I'm too young to be feeling like such an old fart. But, I feel what I feel. I can't help it.

* * * * *

Soon after the presents were all opened, I helped Allie back to her room, then spent some time talking with everyone back there.

They didn't have any sage advice to give me, but it was nice to have someone that I could talk to about it, without having to watch what I said.

Later in the evening, Beau found his way back and joined in the conversation.

Apparently, he could see both Enoch and George, now. Although he couldn't see them clearly, from what he described, he could make out a general outline, which was good enough for him and made him feel special.

It made me feel good to know that even if I had to leave, that Beau would be able to visit with Allie and George, and continue to develop his gift.

* * * * *

When we finally had to leave, I wasn't looking forward to the ride home.

Mom had already told me what she was going to do, and no matter what I said, I knew that I wasn't going to change her mind.

Even so, I had to try.

"Maybe I could stay with Grandma and Grandpa? I could help them out with things around the farm." I weakly offered.

"Your grandparents have got Joe Bob and his kids to help them. They've worked hard for a lot of years and have earned their retirement. They don't need to be raising another kid." Mom said firmly.

"What about Aunt Prissy?" I asked, and didn't even choke on the words. Yes, I was *that* desperate.

"No." Mom said firmly.

That was it.

The ride home continued in silence.

Enoch was silently watching, looking helpless to do anything meaningful.

* * * * *

As soon as we were back home, Enoch and I went upstairs to the safety and security of our room.

Without so much as a word, I immediately walked to the mirror to examine the 'crack'.

Over the past few days, it had opened considerably more, looking more like the backing of the mirror had been damaged, than a flaw in the glass.

"Move the mirror out of the way." Enoch said to me quietly.

I looked at him with surprise at the suggestion, but did as I was told.

"The mirror allows us to 'see' the opening, but we need it out of the way to be able to reach through it." Enoch explained.

"What do I have to do?" I asked cautiously.

"Go to where the mirror was, then try to reach through to me. I'm going to do the same from the other side." Enoch said seriously.

I immediately went to where the mirror had been standing, then started to feel around.

"If you make contact with something, stop. That will be me." Enoch said carefully.

"Okay." I whispered as I slowed my frantic movements, trying desperately to feel *anything*.

"I think I felt you. Hold it there." Enoch said slowly.

I froze in place, hoping beyond hope that he was going to make contact.

"Move forward, just a bit." Enoch said in concentration.

I extended my hand, ever so slightly, and nearly gasped when I felt something touch it.

"Yes. I can feel you." Enoch said happily.

"What do I need to do?" I asked cautiously.

"Move your hand to the left." Enoch whispered.

I carefully moved my hand, and he quickly said, "My left. Your right."

I moved my hand in the other direction slightly and felt the wonderful, glorious sensation of Enoch's hand slipping into mine.

"Yes. I have you." Enoch said with such a joyful expression, that I could tell that he was moments away from crying.

"I can touch you. You're *real*." I said in amazement.

Even though I never had a doubt, being able to verify his existence with my own senses just made the reality of it so much more to me.

"Try to pull me through." Enoch urged me.

"It isn't open enough." I said cautiously.

"Perhaps we can force it." Enoch said anxiously.

"I'll try." I said as I gripped his hand more strongly, then began to pull it toward me.

Since moving to West Texas, one freaky thing after another has happened to me.

But in that moment, when I was pulling Enoch's hand toward me, I saw something that made all the other freakiness seem bland and ordinary.

Right there in front of me, I could see myself holding a disembodied hand.

"Take my wrist for a better grip." Enoch urged me.

I held his hand in both of mine for a moment, then did as he had said.

"Pull, really hard." Enoch said seriously.

"I don't want to hurt you." I responded cautiously.

"Any pain I experience will be worth it, if I can be with you." Enoch said firmly.

"Okay. But tell me if it gets to be too much." I said anxiously, then began to pull.

More and more of his arm was able to come into my reality, but that was it. No matter how we shifted and turned, we couldn't get his shoulder to come through.

I don't know how long we pulled and struggled, but finally we ended up sitting there, both exhausted and disheartened, holding hands.

As weird as it seemed to be holding a disembodied hand emerging from empty space, it was also the most tender, wonderful thing I could imagine.

"In a number of days, the fissure should open enough that I will be able to pass through." Enoch said into the silence that had fallen between us.

"The way Mom's going, I don't know if we'll be here after tomorrow." I said regretfully.

As much as I wanted to be hopeful and happy, I needed to be realistic.

After a few more minutes of silence, Enoch quietly asked, "Is there nothing we can do?"

"I can't think of anything." I said honestly.

I could still see Enoch's insubstantial form, on the other side of the rift, while I continued to hold his 'real' hand in mine.

"What are we going to do?" Enoch asked anxiously.

"I don't know." I said simply, wishing that I had a better answer for him.

We sat like that for a while longer, simply holding hands, soaking in the actual, *real*, physical sensation.

"Assuming that we are able to find a way to get me into your world, what is to become of me?" Enoch asked quietly.

"You'll live with us." I said simply.

"Do you believe that your mother will accept me, with no verifiable evidence as to my origin or identity?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"I guess I didn't think about that." I reluctantly had to admit.

"So, when I cross into your world, it's possible that we still might not be able to be together." Enoch said slowly.

I thought about that for a moment, then said, "If we can't get Mom to listen and go along with it, then we'll try my dad. I don't know what we'll tell him to explain who you are, but I know that he'll do whatever he can to make sure that we can stay together."

"Do you really believe this to be true?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"The last time that I talked to my dad, he made me promise to tell him when I met a nice 'cowboy' so that he could meet him." I said with a smile at the memory.

"I am not a 'cowboy', I am an 'East coast dandy'." Enoch said seriously.

"Somehow, I don't think he'll mind. He just wanted me to know that when I fall in love, he wants to meet the guy, as a way to show that he accepts us and acknowledges that we're a couple." I said warmly.

"I think, from the sound of it, that I am going to like your father." Enoch said as he looked into my eyes.

I squeezed his hand, still held in mine as I said, "I hope you get the chance."

* * * * *

I don't know how long we sat like that.

Neither of us wanted for this new level of closeness between us to end.

Certain parts of my body had gone numb from sitting in an awkward position on the floor before we finally had to accept that we weren't going to be able to pull Enoch across the rift.

When we went to bed and entered our dreamscape, we were both silent.

We expressed our hopes, our worries and our disappointments through touch.

Chapter 12: Choosing Sides

When I awoke, I found that Enoch had scooted the mirror back into place, so that he could watch the progress of the rift.

I went to his side and talked quietly with him, before moving the mirror out of the way so that we could try again.

Although the rift seemed to be somewhat wider, and the speed at which it was opening seemed to be accelerating, we held little hope of making more progress than we had the night before.

I supposed that it was just me being self-indulgent, but I stayed in my room far later than usual and didn't make my way downstairs for breakfast until my stomach could no longer be denied.

Mom had left a note for me on the kitchen table, telling me that she was going to be back late and to expect Grandpa to be stopping by to pick me up for dinner.

I threw together a little something to eat, then returned as quickly as I could to my room.

Enoch and I didn't go to the dreamscape, as we normally would, both of us feeling that we'd rather hold on to each other 'in the flesh'.

Conversation was sparse, and while I think that both of us were trying to appear optimistic, neither of us was very good at it.

At a point later in the day, I had to leave for a few minutes to make myself something for lunch.

When I came back, I brought Enoch half a sandwich.

That confused him at first, but then I explained that I could put it in his hand and that he could pull it through and eat it on his side.

He explained that during the whole time that he had been on the other side, that he had never once felt the need to eat or drink. However, he was excited by the prospect of really 'tasting' something for the first time in nearly a hundred years.

I almost cried when I saw the expression of bliss as he ate the BLT that I had prepared for him. I could tell that the long absent sensations were nearly overwhelming to him.

We continued on after that, holding hands and gently talking, until I heard a knock at the front door.

It was only then that I remembered that Joe Bob was going to drive us to the LGBT resource center to get our test results.

I asked Enoch if he wanted to go, but he said that he would rather stay and keep watch on the progress of the rift.

I gave him a quick kiss, then hurried to change into something presentable before going downstairs.

* * * * *

"Did we wake you up?" Joe Bob asked cautiously, when I climbed into his car.

"No. But Mom's in Santa Fe and I never got dressed this morning, so it took me a few extra minutes." I said seriously.

"Do you really think our tests are okay?" Jim Bob asked nervously.

"Yes. I really do." I said assuringly, then added, "Like I told you last night, this is how they do it. They call you in, sit you down and tell you the results. That way you've got someone right there in front of you to answer any questions that you might have. And they can be sure that you understand everything before you leave."

"But you've never done this before, either, have you?" Joe Bob asked cautiously.

"No. But I've heard enough about it to know what to expect. Back in Michigan, they're really good about teaching us about stuff like this so we won't be all scared about it or believe some of the stupid stuff floating around on the Internet." I said frankly.

"I think the schools here ain't allowed to talk about it." Joe Bob said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Some people seem to think that ignoring it will make it go away. But I'm pretty sure that it works just the opposite." I said honestly.

"What do you mean?" Jim Bob asked curiously.

"All the sex stuff, not just the gay part, if you ignore it and don't teach kids about it, then they do stupid stuff because they don't know any better. They do stupid things that hurt and spread diseases and they get pregnant just

because someone somewhere is too embarrassed to talk about it." I said seriously.

"Or because the bible says it's wrong." Jim Bob added quietly.

"I'm not sure that the bible really says that." I said thoughtfully, then continued, "I mean, they were all about raping the little girls... and probably boys, too, when one bunch would conquer and enslave another. I know that parents wanted their girls to be virgins, so they could get a good price for them when they sold them off for marriage. But I don't remember hearing anything anywhere about the bible saying not to tell kids the truth about sex. I think that part was made up later by the priests and preachers."

"Sounds 'bout like 'em." Joe Bob said absently.

We rode in silence for a few minutes after that. It wasn't uncomfortable silence, at least, not that I was aware of. It just turned out that no one had much to say.

It was Jim Bob who finally, quietly asked, "Is your Ma really going to make you move away?"

"Yeah. It's looking more and more like she is." I reluctantly admitted.

"You know, some kids get to go visit relatives on their summer vacation, while their parents are still busy working and stuff. Maybe you could talk your Ma into something like that?" Jim Bob suggested cautiously.

"I hadn't thought of that. It sounds like a really good idea. I'm pretty sure that Mom has it planned for me to go with her to get moved in. But maybe after we're all unpacked, I could talk her into letting me come back here until the end of the summer." I said thoughtfully.

"You could probably stay with Grandpa Harlan, but if you can't for some reason, you could stay over at our place. Somehow, Ma and Pa always find a way to make room for one more." Joe Bob said casually.

"Thanks, guys. I was really upset and depressed when it looked like I was going to be moving away and might not be able to see any of you again. I don't know if I can get mom to go for it, but this has a lot better chance of working out than anything I came up with." I told them honestly.

* * * * *

What little conversation followed, ended when we arrived at the LGBT resource center.

Much to my surprise, Joe Bob automatically got out of the car when we did and walked inside with us.

"Hi, Boyce. We're here for our results." I said as we walked up to the cash register.

"I'm glad you were able to stop by so soon. Who wants to go back first?" Boyce asked happily.

"I'll go, but would it be alright if Mark and Joe Bob went with me?" Jim Bob asked hopefully.

"Of course. You can bring whatever support you want with you. Just so long as you know that it's entirely up to you. We'll never tell anyone else about your results and you don't have to tell anyone that you don't want to know." Boyce said firmly as he looked into Jim Bob's eyes.

"Whichever way it goes, I want Mark and Joe Bob there with me." Jim Bob said decisively.

"Good enough. Go on back and Hugh will be right with you." Boyce said cheerfully.

* * * * *

We walked into the back room together and stood around.

I'm sure that Jim Bob was thinking the same thing that I was, and didn't want to sit in the chair because he associated it with getting blood drawn.

"How're y'all doing today?" Hugh asked as he walked into the room.

"We're good. We just came for our test results." I answered simply.

"Who wants to be first?" Hugh asked as he picked up a pair of file folders.

"I will." Jim Bob said timidly.

"Do you want for me to give you the results in private?" Hugh asked to be sure.

"No. I'd rather have Mark and Joe Bob here with me, if that's alright." Jim Bob muttered.

"Whatever makes you most comfortable." Hugh assured him.

Jim Bob nodded, then waited expectantly.

Hugh opened one of the folders and reviewed its contents before saying, "Rather than go through this line by line, let me just tell you that you tested negative for everything."

"Is negative good?" Jim Bob asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's very good." Hugh assured him.

Jim Bob smiled as he wilted with relief.

"Before you get too happy, I need to tell you that if you've been sexually active in the past three months, then it's still possible that there's something going on that the test wasn't able to detect. You'll need to come back and have another test in about three months time before we can say, one hundred percent, for sure, that you're completely disease-free." Hugh said seriously.

"But him passing this test means that it's still pretty sure that he doesn't have anything, right?" I asked, just to reinforce the point.

"Yes. If you come out clean on this one, then it's almost certain that you'll be clean on the next one. We just want to be sure that you know that we're not 'one hundred percent' sure, at this point." Hugh said carefully.

"Thank you. I understand." Jim Bob promised him.

Hugh then looked at me and asked, "Would you like to receive your results privately?"

"No. I'm good. Go ahead." I said easily.

After a moment to look through the other folder, Hugh said, "Your tests are all negative, too."

"Good." I said happily.

"Let me go ahead and give you these, so you'll be able to look at what all you were tested for." Hugh said as he handed each of us our results.

"Thank you, Hugh. I'm really glad that you're here." I said honestly.

"I'm just glad that I was able to give you good news. You boys remember to be safe. You hear me?" Hugh asked as he looked from me to Jim Bob.

"We will." Jim Bob assured him.

"Then we're done here. You boys go on and enjoy your day." Hugh said with a satisfied smile.

"How much do we owe you?" Joe Bob asked cautiously, speaking for the first time.

"We operate completely with donations. If you want to contribute, Boyce will be happy to take a donation at the register." Hugh said simply.

"Thanks." Joe Bob said before leading the way out of the room.

* * * * *

By the time Jim Bob and I were out in the lobby, Joe Bob was already talking to Boyce at the register.

We never saw any money change hands, and I wouldn't feel right about asking, but I was understandably curious as to whether Joe Bob had made a donation or not.

* * * * *

Once we were back on the road, heading back to my house, something that had been bothering me for a while finally found it's way to the forefront of my mind.

"Why are you guys living in a trailer instead of out at the big house?" I asked curiously.

"We lived out there, two different times." Jim Bob said honestly, then explained, "Once, it was before we got the second trailer. We were packed in so tight that we needed more space. The other time was when the furnace went out."

"But I still don't understand why you don't just live in the big house where there's plenty of room for everyone and a big yard and... stuff." I said frankly.

"Partly, because Pa wants to be close to his work. It's way on the far side of town from here. But I think mostly it's because Pa wants to provide for his family." Joe Bob said seriously.

I looked at him with surprise at the statement.

"I guess he's proud because even though we ain't got much, we earned every bit of it. Now, if it was to happen that any of us was doing without or suffering because of it, he'd swallow his pride and accept help. But until he has to, he ain't gonna do that." Joe Bob said seriously.

I thought about that for a moment, then realized that, even though I wouldn't have thought it possible, my respect for Joe Bob had once again increased.

* * * * *

As we approached the house, I invited the guys in, but they said that they had to get back home to watch the kids, so that their mom could go to a

lamaze class.

I know it was rude, but I couldn't help but ask, "Hasn't she had enough kids to know how it works by now?"

Joe Bob laughed at the question and Jim Bob smiled.

"I suppose she has." Joe Bob finally said, then continued, "In fact, she's had so many kids that now she's *teaching* the class."

"Oh!" I said with surprise.

From my brief meeting with Lindie, I could easily see how she would do well as a lamaze instructor. Not only would her easygoing nature serve to put people at ease, but no one could possibly deny that she spoke from a wealth of *experience*.

* * * * *

When I got back to the house, I went immediately upstairs to see how Enoch was doing.

Just as I expected, he was sitting on the floor, in front of the mirror, watching the rift.

"How's it going?" I asked cautiously.

"I think it's opened some more. Would you like to try again?" He asked hopefully.

"Yeah." I said as I dropped the file folder on the desk inside the door.

Before I could even cross the room, Enoch had already scooted the mirror out of the way and taken his place on the opposite side.

"Are you ready?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes." Enoch said anxiously.

I put my hand in the proper place in mid air and waited for the expected contact.

I had to shift a little to my left, but my flesh finally met his.

"Pull." Enoch instructed, as soon as he had a firm grip.

As gently, yet firmly, as I possibly could, I once again tried to drag him through the opening in reality.

There was no doubt that more of his arm was coming through. This time, I could make out part of his shoulder. But no matter how many different ways

we twisted or turned, it soon became apparent that he wasn't going to fit.

"I'm sorry. I really thought it was going to work, this time." Enoch said as he settled into place and held my hand.

"I know. We got a lot closer." I said gently, then added, "If you had little girly shoulders like mine, you probably could have gotten through yesterday."

"If there were any way to make them smaller, I would." Enoch said frankly.

"Don't you dare." I said with a smile, then added, "I LOVE your broad shoulders. Even if they take a little extra work, I wouldn't change them... or anything else about you."

* * * * *

We sat like that for a while.

I don't know how long.

It got dark.

I didn't leave to have dinner, but I wasn't much worried about that.

There was nowhere else that I wanted to be.

A sound from downstairs finally drew my attention.

When I got up, I realized that I had been sitting for quite a while. My legs had fallen asleep.

To make matters worse, I had never lit the oil lamp, so I was stumbling around in near darkness on unsteady legs.

* * * * *

"Good. You're up." Mom said as I walked down the stairs, still not feeling entirely steady on my feet.

"How did things go?" I asked cautiously, automatically hoping for the worst.

"Well, I'm now *officially* employed AND, I found us a place to live." She said happily.

"Great." I said unenthusiastically.

"I know you don't want to go. You've made that abundantly clear. But, it's up to me to keep us going, so for now, you're just going to have to do as I say." She said firmly.

Although there were things that I could have said at that point, I'm pretty sure that none of them would have improved my situation.

"I need for you to go through your things and pack what's most important to you." Mom said firmly.

"Right now?" I asked in shock.

"Yes. We'll be driving out in the morning. You'd better snap to it! We'll be leaving well before sun up." Mom said seriously.

"When will we be back?" I asked cautiously.

"I don't know, yet. When we can find the time we'll come back to finish moving out. But for right now, you need to get moving. Pack your bags, then get to bed. Tomorrow is going to be a *very* long day."

My head was swimming.

Admittedly, some of that might have been from skipping supper. But I was overwhelmed by what this could mean for me and Enoch.

If he were to go with me and we couldn't get back in a reasonable amount of time, then the doorway might close again and we might never have another chance.

And, what if he didn't want to go?

What if I ended up going to Santa Fe without him?

What if he came with me and somehow got lost?

What if he stayed?

How would he cope with being alone?

How would I?

While I was standing there with my mind racing, Mom must have gone off to handle her own packing.

On unsteady legs, I started up the incredibly tall flight of stairs.

{How can I leave him here?}

{How can I take him away from here?}

{How can I stay here?}

The questions were flying around in my head like flies around a bloated corpse.

I felt unsteady, unstable and unable to cope.

As my homing beacon somehow led me back to my room, I finally stepped into my sanctuary.

"What's wrong?" Enoch asked with immediate concern.

"Mom. She found us a new place to live... we're leaving in the morning, before sun up." I said, barely able to believe the words that were coming out of my mouth.

"When will you be back?" Enoch asked slowly.

"She doesn't know." I answered absently as I reached under the bed and took out my suitcase.

"What are you doing?" Enoch asked in panic.

"I've got to pack." I said as I opened the suitcase and pulled my empty backpack from inside.

"Maybe, if we go to the mirror and try again, we can try harder." Enoch said urgently.

"Would you hand me my flute?" I asked absently as the swirling thoughts seemed to be on the verge of forming into something coherent.

"I know that I asked you not to make me choose, but I have chosen. Even if it means giving up the chance to return to the real world, I want to go with you." Enoch said anxiously.

I smiled at him and quietly said, "Thanks, E. Thanks for choosing me."

Enoch looked at me strangely, obviously not knowing how to interpret my response.

"My flute?" I asked as I gathered some clothes.

"Yes. Here." Enoch said with distraction as he handed it to me.

I glanced around the room, then walked to my bed and slipped the pillowcase off my pillow.

"Mark? Can we try the crack in the mirror, one more time?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Just a minute." I said as I walked to the dresser, then started gathering all the toy soldiers, very gently, into the pillowcase.

"What are you doing?" Enoch asked nervously.

"Would you move the mirror out of the way? I'll be right there." I asked as I carefully put the pillowcase into my backpack.

"You're going to try?" Enoch asked hopefully as he scooted the mirror.

I looked around the room one more time to see if there were anything else that I considered to be important to me.

When I glanced at Enoch's journal on the desk, I quickly grabbed it then put it into the backpack as I walked across the room.

"Pull really hard this time. I think we can do it." Enoch said as he waited for me to take my place.

"No, E. I'm not going to pull. You are." I said simply.

"What?" Enoch asked incredulously.

"There's nothing in this world that I care about as much as I care for you. Here, take this." I said as I held my backpack forward.

As Enoch's hand met mine, I handed the backpack to him.

"Are you sure about this? If you come through to this side, we may never be able to return to the real world." Enoch asked cautiously as he drew the backpack through the rift and into the other realm.

"I know that. I don't care." I said as I held out my hand and waited for him to take it.

"I would rather continue for eternity alone than to ever hurt you, Mark." Enoch said as he looked into my eyes.

"I love you, E. I don't care about anything else, just as long as we can be together." I said with a smile to convey my tranquil acceptance of what was to come.

As I felt Enoch's hand grasp my wrist, I twisted and pushed with all my might to be able to force my way through to the other side.

* * * * *

"Mark? Are you up?" Patsy asked as she knocked on his bedroom door.

After a moment with no answer, she cautiously opened the door to find the oil lamp burning and no sign of her son anywhere in the room.

"Mark? Did you get up early?" She called out as she left the room and hurried down the stairs.

There was no sign of her son, nor was there any evidence that he had been downstairs at all, since the night before.

"Mark! This isn't funny! Where are you?!" Patsy called out as she started going from room to room.

* * * * *

"Did you hear that?" Enoch asked curiously.

"Yeah. She'll get over it." Mark responded quietly.

"I'm not sure that she will. I know that I wouldn't." Enoch said frankly.

"I guess what I mean is that she'll get over it, because she doesn't have any other choice. What's done is done. There's no going back." Mark said honestly.

"Do you regret your decision?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Right this minute? No. Not at all." Mark said with a smile.

"But what about in a hundred years?" Enoch asked with concern.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask me about it then." Mark said simply.

"What should we do now?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Whatever we want. We have forever."

The End

(of Part 1)

Chapter 13: Forever Interrupted

Mark had only marginally understood what Enoch had meant about time flowing differently in the parallel world of darkness.

He honestly couldn't tell if hours or minutes had passed between one of his mother's visits to the room and the next. Of course, the mind blowing kisses that he had been receiving since his arrival might also have had something to do with it.

"Shhh. Here she comes again." Mark whispered as his mother's ethereal light shown into the room.

"You don't have to be quiet. She can't hear us." Enoch told him honestly.

"I know you say that, but it still... what's she doing?" Mark asked suddenly as he stepped away from Enoch's side.

"It would appear that she is going through your personal belongings."

"I know that you don't like it when I say bad things about my mother, but if she keeps that up, I might not be able to stop myself."

"I believe, that in this circumstance, I might be able to overlook such a breach in etiquette."

"I love you, E." Mark said as he once again turned to pull him into a hug.

"But will you still love me in a thousand years?"

"I can't wait to find out."

* * * * *

Patsy had left the room again, leaving the boys free to express their love for each other. As the kissing became more intense, Mark suddenly stopped and pulled away.

"What's wrong?" Enoch asked with concern.

"I forgot lube! And I was at the resource center yesterday where I could have picked some up!"

"We may have to explore other options."

Mark giggled, then said, "Actually, that might not be so bad."

Enoch then moved in to give Mark another long, lingering kiss.

"Ahem." A deep voice said from nearby, causing them both to jump.

Both turned to see a remarkably handsome, albeit somewhat rugged looking man staring back at them. While the man's body was certainly fit and attractive, the thing that drew them were the man's long dark hair and chocolaty dark eyes.

"You can't be here." The man stated firmly.

"We already are." Mark informed him slowly.

"You can't remain."

"Unless you know of a way out, I don't think we've got much of a choice."

After a moment to consider that, the man said more calmly, "I see what you mean. Let me start over. My name is Auziel, but you can call me Oz, if you like."

"I'm Mark and this is Enoch." Mark said carefully, still cautious of the unknown stranger who had somehow joined them.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, both. But you still can't be here."

"Why not?" Enoch asked timidly.

"Mainly, because this is a place for the dead and... well, you're not."

"But we aren't hurting anyone by being here. Can't we just stay?" Mark asked plaintively.

"You may not have hurt anyone yet, but you soon will. The two of you together are producing your own spiritual light. Sooner or later, you'll attract those who are seeking the true light. And it could end up being very bad for you."

"Do you mean lost souls?"

"No. Well, yes. Lost souls will be attracted to you, but no, that's not who I was thinking of. I'm speaking of those who *feed on* lost souls, the demons. They are attracted to spiritual light so that they can devour the souls of the departed and drain their spiritual energy."

"I have been here for nearly one hundred years and have encountered no such creatures. Only some hostile spirits who wished to overtake my physical body." Enoch said reasonably.

"Were you here alone all that time?"

"Yes. I was alone until Mark arrived... a matter of weeks ago, I think. It's difficult to follow the passage of time, here."

"Actually, it was just over a week... at least, as far as I can tell." Mark gently corrected.

"Your light alone probably wouldn't be enough to attract anything. These creatures are attracted to the divine light that comes to collect the souls of those written in the book of life."

"What about everyone else?" Mark asked curiously.

"That's something that the living aren't really supposed to know about."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes our jobs a lot harder. I'm here to collect souls for the realm that I serve."

"Don't you serve God?" Enoch asked with astonishment and a bit of fear.

"I do and I don't. I was one of the angels who stood with... um, the defeated one, in the great war. I was cast out of heaven, so I no longer serve the Father in that sense. But I work to maintain order and attend to his children in the afterlife, so in that way I *do* serve Him by playing my role."

"So, are you a servant of Satan?"

Oz looked at Enoch with surprise, then hurried to explain, "No! I suppose it would sound like that to you. The great war occurred because... the defeated one, and a large number of angels disagreed with what the Father had planned. We thought that having a heaven for only the chosen few who were written in the book of life was horribly unfair to the rest. Two thirds of the angels stood with the defeated one to call for an afterlife to be provided for the souls of the good and decent people who didn't make it into the book."

"And I'm guessing you didn't win." Mark said slowly.

"It depends on how you define winning. The Father called upon the angels who were loyal to him to cast us out of heaven, never to return. When the war was over, all of us those who stood with the defeated one were relegated to the underworld. Although the defeated one tried to band us together as one unified force to renew the war, few of us had the will to fight a sustained battle. Instead, we tried to make the underworld into a home. Eventually leaders arose from within our midsts with different views on how the souls of the departed should be handled. When a soul passes into limbo, where we are now, we examine him to decide where he will be most welcome."

"So everyone doesn't go to heaven or hell?"

"Technically, I suppose that they do. There is heaven, where the Father and his most loyal angels live and welcome the souls of His followers who are written in the book. Then there is hell, but hell is subdivided into a variety of regions, each with its own philosophy." Oz said carefully.

"So, are you here to take us to hell?" Mark asked as he moved a little closer to Enoch's side.

"No. You two are alive, I will return you to the realm of the living so that you can continue to live and grow. And, at the end of your days, hopefully your souls will be destined for a place that you can enjoy for all eternity."

"How can we do that?"

"By living. I can't tell you anything except to live your lives well and make decisions that you believe are right. If you will do that, your final judgement will bring you to the proper place."

"We can't go back. There's nothing for us in the world of the living."

"Let me take care of them!" A voice boomed from the doorway.

There stood a man with dark golden blond hair and a sword in his hand. The man was certainly more muscular than Oz, but his cold merciless blue eyes negated any beauty the man might have possessed.

"Rogziel, this doesn't concern you. I'm sorting it out." Oz said firmly.

"They are living beings in the realm of the dead. One stroke of my sword will sort them out rather effectively."

"No. They aren't destined for your realm, they do not concern you."

"I serve the Father, so they *do* concern me."

"Please, Rogziel. Don't do this. They are children. Let me return them to the world of the living so that they can continue to grow. To cut their lives short will automatically condemn them to eternity in the underworld. Wouldn't the Father want them to have the chance to ascend?"

"Don't play word games with me, Auziel. They don't belong here and I won't allow them to draw righteous spirits away from the Holy Light."

"I don't want that either. Please give me time to work things out for them in the mortal world and I'll send them back."

"Work quickly, Auziel. If I find that even one of the souls of the righteous has strayed due to their presence, I will strike them down for the good of all." Rogziel bellowed, then turned dramatically as he left, revealing his huge white wings which hadn't been evident in the meager light.

All three of them stood quietly for a moment, until Oz finally said, "Guys. Stay here and stay calm. The brighter your light shines, the more likely you are to draw unwanted attention. I'm going to go and try to arrange things for you in the mortal realm."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Mark asked quietly as he was fighting to comprehend the severity of their situation.

"Just keep calm and quiet. I don't know how long Rogziel will resist the urge to come after you." Oz said gravely, then turned to leave.

In doing so, he revealed his massive, dark wings.

Mark and Enoch held on to each other as they watched Oz walk toward the wall, then fade into nothing.

* * * * *

"My flight just arrived, I'm at the airport. Are you still at the house?"

"Good."

"No. Stay there. I've got the address and I think I still remember how to get there."

"Don't worry, Pat, I'll find him. Remember, this is what I do for a living. I'm really good at it."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Just hang in there."

"Bye."

* * * * *

Derek anxiously awaited his turn at the cab stand, outside the airport. Being as late as it was, it was fairly busy.

"Where to?" The cab driver asked as Derek climbed into the back seat of the car.

Derek told him the address, then waited for the cab to pull away from the curb.

"That's going to run you tween thirty and forty dollars. That alright?" The cabbie asked to be sure.

"Yes. Fine." Derek said distractedly.

"In town on business?" The cab driver asked curiously as he pulled away from the curb.

"Not really." Derek said darkly.

"Ah! Pleasure, then?" The cabbie asked with a smile.

"No. Not really." Derek said as he finally resolved himself to holding a conversation with the chatty man.

"So, what brings you to town? Don't tell me that someone suckered you into coming here as a 'tourist destination'." The cab driver asked incredulously.

The absurdity of that elicited a smile from Derek, then he answered, "My ex-wife called and told me that our son is missing. I just came down to see if I can help her find him."

"How old?"

"Fourteen."

"Your kid in the habit of running away?"

"No. Mark's never caused us a moment of trouble. As far as I know, he's never even *threatened* to run away."

"Believe it or not, this isn't the first time I've heard a story like this. Let me do a little poking around and see if I can find out if any new baddies are in town or anything like that. Can I find you at the address where I'm dropping you off?"

"Yes. As far as I know, that's where I'll be staying. And if I'm not there, that's probably the best place to leave a message for me."

"Nothin'll prolly come of it, but I'll sniff around and see what's up. Someone without a car can't get nowhere around here without a cab. Too damned spread out."

"Yes. I suppose it is. Thank you..." Derek hesitated when he realized that the man who had offered to go out of his way to help him had yet to give his name.

"Here's my card. Call me if you're needin a ride somewhere and I can fill you in on what's been stirrin in the weeds."

Derek accepted the card and read it before saying, "I may just do that. Thank you, Oz."

* * * * *

When the cab arrived, Derek made sure to give the driver a generous tip.

As soon as his ex-wife stepped out of the house, all thoughts of the plane trip and the cab ride were distant memories.

"Is there any news?" Derek asked hopefully.

She shook her head, unable to answer verbally, for fear of bursting into tears.

Derek pulled her into his arms to comfort her as the cab pulled away.

He held her for a moment before he realized that he hadn't taken his suitcase out of the cab, but he was relieved to find that the cab driver had taken the time and trouble to take the suitcase out before leaving. He was glad that he had given the man a decent tip.

"Do you have his cellphone number? Maybe we can try calling him. Or, if he doesn't answer, I might be able to get a listing of his phone records." Derek asked, falling into 'detective' mode.

"Remember when we looked at getting him a cellphone? All those horrible contracts? We decided to wait."

"What about the house phone?"

"It's supposed to be turned on Friday."

"Then how could he have called for a ride? You don't think he would have set off on foot, do you?"

"I have the only phone; the cellphone in my purse." Pat said in realization.

"What about his computer? Did he take that with him?"

"Um, no. It's upstairs in the study, beside my bedroom. Besides, it doesn't have Internet access. There's no way he could have used that."

"I'd like to take a look at it anyway. I'd like to see if he has anything in his email or instant messaging programs that might give us a clue."

"You can look at it if you want. But I don't remember seeing him on his computer since we arrived."

"Do you have any idea why he might have wanted to run away?"

"He was mad at me. When I got the job in New Mexico, he said that he didn't want to leave here. He's made friends..."

"What friends? Do you know their names?"

"Yes. Of course. You remember Joe Bob, don't you? Mark's become good friends with some of his older children. They've been over to visit with Mark a few times."

"Do you have a phone number? I'd like to talk to them."

"Yes. I didn't think..."

"What about the job? Did this happening cause you to lose it?"

"What? No... I don't have to start until Monday. But if this hadn't happened, I was going to drive us to Santa Fe today so that we could get settled in before I have to start work."

"I took some family leave time when you called me, so I don't have to hurry right back. If things end up dragging on too long, I can stay here and keep looking while you go and get your job established."

"I can't... I should be here."

"I know what you're feeling, Pat. I'm feeling it, too. But you need to be practical. No matter how things turn out, you're going to need your job. And don't forget, this is what I do every single day. I'll find Mark. Trust me."

"I suppose you're right."

"Now, why don't you call Joe Bob's kids and see if there's any way I can talk to them. While you're doing that, I'd like to take a look at Mark's room to see if he left us any clues."

"I'll show you where it is."

* * * * *

"The haunted room?" Derek asked with surprise.

"Yes. It's the one he picked."

When Derek walked into the bedroom, he automatically reached for the light switch.

"There's no electricity in this room. That's why he's been keeping his laptop in the study." Pat said frankly before leaving to make her call.

Using what little light filtered in from the hallway, Derek gave the room a cursory inspection then decided to go to the study and check out the laptop first.

* * * * *

As a police detective, Derek knew a few tricks, so it didn't take him long to gain full access to his son's computer.

His first stop was the instant messenger program, but he was surprised to find that it had never been installed. From there, he went to the email manager, but found that the most recent email was over two weeks old and that nothing in his 'inbox' was the least bit suspicious.

From there, he checked the browser cache, to see if Mark had been visiting any Websites that might have made him a target for some sort of predator, but once again, he found nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, in his experience, his son's surfing habits were actually a bit on the tame side. The few 'adult' sites that he had visited were of some of the most generic young adult models and quite a few of the pictures in the cache weren't even fully nude.

After finally resolving himself to the fact that there didn't seem to be anything of relevance on his son's computer, Derek went back to do a more thorough investigation of the bedroom.

* * * * *

"That's my dad." Mark said cautiously as he watched his father trying to figure out how to light the oil lamp.

"You look more like your mother."

"Yeah. It's the James family genes. They're strong in me."

"They certainly are." Enoch said, then gave Mark a quick kiss.

"He's going through my stuff!"

"He is probably trying to detect clues as to where you might have gone." Enoch said seriously, then added, "However, no matter what he finds, I very seriously doubt that he will think to look for you in limbo."

"Yeah. Probably not." Mark said slowly as he continued to watch his father's activities.

* * * * *

"Is it important for you to talk to them tonight? If it is, I can drive you over to their house. But if you can wait, Joe Bob Jr's off tomorrow, so he can stop by here in the morning to talk to you." Pat asked from the doorway.

"Tomorrow will be fine." Derek said distractedly as he slowly went through the folded clothes in the dresser.

"He said tomorrow will be fine. He'll be waiting for you here at the house." Pat said before hanging up her cellphone.

"Have you noticed if there's anything missing?" Derek asked as he walked to the chifferobe and opened it.

"I haven't seen Mark's flute around. But I haven't really noticed anything else. Of course, I haven't really been in here very much since we moved in. I've been focused on other things."

"Of course. I just thought I'd ask." Derek said as he looked carefully at the unusual collection of both modern and vintage clothing.

"Mark started wearing a button up shirt and a waistcoat when we arrived. I should have taken a picture, he looked so handsome." Pat said as tears filled her eyes.

"I would like to have seen that."

A knock on the front door caused them both to look up in question.

"Maybe it's someone who knows about Mark." Pat said quickly as she dashed out of the room.

Derek looked around one last time before blowing out the lamp and following.

* * * * *

"It's for you." Pat called from the front door.

"For me?" Derek asked in surprise as he walked down the stairs.

"Did some checking, like I said I would." Oz said from the doorway.

"What did you find out?" Derek asked hopefully as he hurried to the door.

"Not much. I talked to a few friends of mine, who hate to see it when kids go missing. They checked their log books and from what we could tell, no cab company in the area has dispatched a cab to anywhere near this address. I don't know if that helps, but I thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks for checking." Derek said sincerely.

"My friends, they're going to do a little sniffing around and they might be able to come up with some leads that the police wouldn't be able to follow up on. I can't say that they'll find anything, but it won't hurt for them to look."

"Thank your friends for me. I really appreciate it."

"Sure thing. Expect me to be stopping by after my shift tomorrow. I'll tell you what we found."

"I can give you my cellphone number..." Pat quickly offered.

"I'd rather not. I don't like talking on those things any more than I have to. You never know who's listening." Oz said before turning to leave.

"Thanks again." Derek called after him and received a casual wave in response.

* * * * *

"It's really getting late. Why don't I fix up a room for you?" Pat asked as they walked back inside.

"Actually, if you don't mind, I think I'd like to stay in Mark's room. Maybe it'll give me some kind of inspiration about what Mark was thinking or had gotten himself into."

"Don't you need to preserve the scene in case you need to dust for fingerprints or something like that?"

"As far as I can tell, no crime has been committed. And I really get the feeling that there's something there, in that room, that I'm just not seeing."

"If you think it'll help, go ahead."

"I'll see you in the morning. Try to get a good sleep." Derek told his ex-wife gently.

"I'll do my best." Pat said before walking around the first floor and turning off lights.

Derek waited for a moment, for her to be finished, then walked up the stairs at her side.

* * * * *

Mark and Enoch followed along and watched as Derek went around the room, carefully looking at things. He seemed to take a particularly long time looking at the top of the dresser, where the wooden soldiers had been.

After some more snooping around, Derek finally gave in to his tiredness and started to get ready for bed.

As they watched him peeling off his clothes, Enoch absently commented, "You do get *some* features from your father."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You have much the same body type. You are more... fit than I recall Mark, the other Mark, being."

Mark looked at his father, who was now climbing into bed, wearing only his boxer shorts, then said, "Well, I guess if that's true, I'm okay with it."

"Hey, guys. How's it going?" Sounded from behind them.

They turned in time to see Oz forming into being, out of the darkness.

"We've been staying calm, like you said." Mark assured him.

"Good. That makes things a lot easier."

"So, what have you found out about us going back to the 'real' world?"

"I'm still working on it, just hang in there." Oz said seriously, then added, "I think that I'm going to be able to get things pulled together before too long."

"That's great! You're setting things up for Enoch, too?"

"I'll do as much as I can. If he's been out of circulation for nearly a hundred years... it could get complicated."

"It's okay. We trust you, Oz. If you say it's going to be alright, we'll do our part." Mark assured him.

"Yes. That's actually what I'm here to talk to you about."

"What's that?"

"Regular humans aren't supposed to be able to verify the existence of ethereals. It buggers the works. But, hey, what kind of a fallen angel would I be if I didn't break some rules now and then? Even so, you two have got to promise me, no tabloids, no interviews, no 'tell all' books... nothing. If you two start spreading around where you've been and what you've experienced, I won't be able to stop Rogziel, or one of the others, from shutting you up permanently."

"We won't tell anyone. I promise." Enoch said timidly.

"Who'd believe us, anyway?" Mark added.

"Actually, you'd be surprised." Oz said consideringly, then became more serious as he said, "I've got a few more things to line up. Remember to keep calm and not draw any attention to yourselves."

"We'll do our best." Mark said simply, then watched as Oz walked away and faded into the darkness.

Chapter 14: Chasing the Rabbit

"Should we, maybe, go into his dream and talk to him?" Mark asked cautiously.

"I do not know if that is possible. I have only ever been able to draw you into the dream place that I created." Enoch explained carefully, then added, "And I do not see what favorable thing we might be able to accomplish by revealing to your father where we really are."

"Yeah. You're probably right. I guess I just feel like I should be doing something to make him feel better, since he's here, looking for me."

"Is it not as it was with your mother, a matter of him just having to 'get over it'?"

"No. Dad didn't back me into a corner and force me to choose. None of this is his fault."

"Even so, I cannot see anything to be gained by revealing our presence, even in dreams."

"You're right, E. I know you are. I just don't have to like it."

"If I can think of a way that we can offer your father some sort of consolation, I will tell you immediately."

"Yeah. I'm sure that if we both think on it, that we'll be able to come up with something." Mark said as he held Enoch close to his side.

Enoch closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of holding and being held.

"Thanks, E. I was about to make a stupid mistake and you stopped me. And besides, we already promised Oz that we wouldn't do anything to draw attention to ourselves." Mark said gratefully.

"Do you believe that Oz will be able to arrange matters so that I may return to the 'real' world?"

"Yeah. I really think so." Mark said assuringly, then added, "He's an angel, after all."

"A fallen angel."

* * * * *

Derek woke from a deep sleep, feeling foggy and confused.

He had a morning erection that was demanding his attention. Since the divorce, Derek had been forced to take matters in hand, so to speak, and usually did so simply as a matter of relieving his tension.

However, in this circumstance, not only was there the worry that he was feeling over Mark's disappearance which was weighing heavily on him. But also there was the fact that he was sleeping in his son's bed. Even though he believed himself to be completely alone, giving in to the urge in his current location would be beyond creepy.

Finally he forced himself to get out of bed and glanced down for a moment at his erection, obscenely tenting out his boxer shorts. He once again considered giving himself some relief, but finally decided that he needed to get on with his day. He opened his suitcase and gathered some clothes before leaving the room to shower.

* * * * *

"It seems that your physique is not all that you inherited from your father." Enoch said in astonishment.

"Yeah. It looks that way." Mark said, equally stunned.

"You know, now that we can touch each other, we are able to do things that we were unable to do before."

"Oz told us to keep calm and I noticed that even when I kiss you, my light gets brighter. I'm starting to lose my cool just *thinking* about doing more. Besides all of that, my dad could walk in on us at any moment."

"He would not be able to see us."

"Yeah. But I'd be able to see him."

"Yes. I simply..."

"I know. I want to do it, too. We just can't, not right now."

"You're right, Mark. I know you are. I just don't have to like it."

Mark recognized his own words being turned back on him and smiled before moving in to give Enoch a loving kiss.

* * * * *

After finishing his shower and dressing for the day, Derek returned to the bedroom where he had spent the night and decided to take another look around, this time with the aid of the light of day.

He didn't discover anything more than he had the night before. However, now that he had better light, he took the time to more thoroughly examine the folder that had been on Mark's desk, when he had arrived.

It was a series of test results, all negative, that was dated only a few days previously. Derek made note of the name and address of the LGBT resource center.

"Derek? Oh, good. You're awake. I'm going to be making breakfast, would you care for any?" Pat asked from the bedroom doorway.

"Sure, if it's no extra trouble."

"No trouble at all. If you'll come downstairs in a few minutes, I should have coffee ready." She said before walking out of the room.

Derek put the file folder back on the desk, then walked to the dresser and once again examined the uneven series of circles on the slightly dusty surface and tried to imagine what might have created that pattern.

However, before very long, the *idea* of coffee called out to him, even though the aroma of the fresh brew hadn't found its way upstairs, yet.

* * * * *

"Should we follow him?" Mark asked cautiously.

"The farther we stray from this room, the more likely it is that we will lose our bearings and not be able to find our way back."

"Yeah. And besides, Oz is trying to work things out for us. If we leave, he might not be able to find us when he needs to."

"Perhaps, if your father were aware of our presence, it might be different. He could see to it that we did not get lost and could return here. But until such a time, I believe it would be best for us to remain where we are."

After a moment Mark quietly said, "I guess I'll just have to trust Dad to handle things without me. It's not like I don't have a lifetime of experience doing that, anyway."

"Why were you and your father not closer?"

"I don't know. We just never were. It's funny, when I talked to him on the phone the other day, I felt closer to him than I ever did when we were living with him."

"Well, maybe now that he thinks that he has lost you, it might make him reconsider your relationship."

"Maybe."

* * * * *

"That really smells good." Derek said honestly as he walked into the kitchen.

"Thanks. Coffee's ready." Pat said as she gestured vaguely toward the coffee maker before going back to her cooking.

"Do you think we did the right thing?" Derek asked thoughtfully as he walked to the coffee maker and poured himself a mug.

"You mean the divorce?"

"Yeah. Should we have tried harder to make it work?"

"Make what work? For the past few years, the only thing we had in common was Mark." Pat said simply, then added more quietly, "I didn't realize until we came here that we didn't really even have that, not for a while now."

"How do you mean?"

"He's grown up so much. He's so much more mature and responsible than I gave him credit for... Since we've been here, I've realized that I hardly know him anymore."

"At least you can hang on to the fact that you know the person that he *was*, even if you aren't quite up-to-date on the person who he *is*." Derek said as he looked at his ex-wife with a weary smile.

"You should have seen Mark when you told him about wanting to meet his 'cowboy'. You don't have to worry. He adores you. Just... be there, and make some sort of an effort. If you'll do that much, I'm sure that Mark will do the rest."

"I've been such a fool." Derek said as he walked across the room and took a seat at the table.

"Maybe you could try thinking about it this way..." Pat said as she returned the majority of her attention back to her cooking. "...all this time, you've been working and training and devoting every minute of your life toward becoming the best detective that you can be. Even if you lost sight of Mark

at some point along the way, now you get to use those skills that you've developed to help him."

"I suppose."

Pat walked across the kitchen and placed a plate, filled with bacon, eggs and toast, in front of him.

"Thank you, this looks great."

"Do you want any milk or juice, while I'm up?"

"No. The coffee's fine."

As Pat carried her plate to the table, she quietly said, "I remembered something that happened day before yesterday that might be significant."

"What's that?"

"While we were at Emmylou's birthday party, Mark received a phone call on my cellphone. He left the room and took the phone with him, so I don't know any of what was said, but the caller identified himself as... Boyce... I think." Pat strained to remember.

"Maybe one of Joe Bob's kids knows who that is. Did they happen to say when they would be coming over?"

"Around nine."

Derek glanced at the clock on the microwave, then nodded.

"I have quite a few things that I need to take care of today, if I'm going to be starting work on Monday. I don't know how long my errands will take. But you can reach me on my cellphone, if you need anything." Pat said, then thought to ask, "Have you checked to see if you've got a decent signal?"

"No. I hadn't thought about that." Derek said as he took out his phone.

"If you're going to be staying in Mark's room, you might want to set your charger up in the study." Pat suggested between bites of food.

Derek looked at his phone for a moment, then said, "I should have enough battery to get through today and it looks like I'm getting three bars."

"Good. Then call if you need anything. I might not be able to come back and get you right away, but I should be able to work you into my flight plan." Pat said with a smile.

"I'll keep that in mind." Derek said with a grin, then added, "And if it comes to it, I can always call for a cab."

Pat nodded her agreement, since her mouth happened to be full at the moment.

* * * * *

"Hello, Sir. Are you Mr. Taylor?" Joe Bob Jr asked cautiously.

"That's right, but you can call me Derek."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be proper, Sir. But maybe we could call you 'Uncle' Derek." Joe Bob suggested cautiously.

Derek smiled and said, "That would be fine. Would you like to introduce me?"

"Yes, Sir. Uncle Derek, I'm Joe Bob, you can call me Junior, if you like. These are my brothers Jim Bob and Beau."

"It's very nice to meet all of you. Please come inside so that we can talk."

* * * * *

"Is Mark really missing?" Beau asked with concern.

"Yes. That's why I wanted to talk with you. You don't happen to know where he is, do you?" Derek asked as he led the boys into the living room.

"No... Um, no, Sir. But I really like Mark, so if he's missing, I want to help you find him." Beau said honestly.

Derek gestured toward the furniture before taking a seat in one of the wing backed chairs.

"Do any of you have any idea where Mark might have gone, or if he has any friends that he might have gone to stay with?"

"No, Sir." Joe Bob answered for all of them.

"My ex-wife, your Aunt Pat, mentioned that Mark had recently received a phone call from someone named 'Boyce', do any of you know who that is?"

"Yes, Sir. I do." Jim Bob timidly answered.

Derek waited expectantly for him to continue.

Jim Bob was wracked with indecision, not sure if he would be betraying Mark by divulging what he knew.

"Well?" Derek prompted.

"Boyce works at the LGBT resource center where Mark and I went to get our blood tests." Jim Bob answered shyly.

"Do you have any idea why he might have been calling Mark?"

"It was probably to let him know that our blood test results were in."

"Did any of you notice if this 'Boyce' person was showing any particular... interest... in Mark?"

"No! Boyce is a good guy. He was really nice and he helped us!" Jim Bob said with offense at the implication.

"Sir, I was there with Mark and Jim Bob. Neither of the men working at the resource center said or did anything improper. They were friendly and professional." Joe Bob assured him.

"I see." Derek said thoughtfully, then quietly added, "I'd still like to speak with them, just the same."

"I don't know the address, but I can tell you where it is." Joe Bob offered.

"I think I have the address on the paperwork up in Mark's room. I'll check on that before you leave. But before I do that, do you know if there's anyone else that Mark's had contact with since he's been here?" Derek asked cautiously and noticed Jim Bob stiffen slightly at the question.

Both Beau and Joe Bob seemed to look surreptitiously at Jim Bob, presumably to see if he were going to respond.

"Anything you tell me might turn out to be something important." Derek persisted, focusing his statement at Jim Bob.

A few seconds of silence with Derek looking directly at him, waiting for an answer, finally caused Jim Bob's resolve to crumble.

"Well, just after Mark first got here, he went with me to, um, someone's house and talked to him for a few minutes." Jim Bob said nervously.

"Who were you visiting?" Derek asked in a leading tone.

"My... um... piano teacher." Jim Bob said anxiously and from the sound of his voice, it seemed that his mouth must have suddenly gone as dry as all of West Texas.

"Why would Mark want to talk to a piano teacher?" Derek asked cautiously.

Jim Bob had taken on the appearance of a deer in the headlights by this point and by the way his eyes were shifting around, he was trying desperately to come up with a satisfactory answer.

"Jim Bob was having a problem with Lonny, and Mark helped him sort it out." Joe Bob said simply.

"What kind of problem, if you don't mind me asking?" Derek probed.

"I really couldn't say." Joe Bob said honestly.

Beau was looking back and forth, as though he were watching a tennis match. From the guileless expression that he wore, Derek was fairly certain that the boy had no idea.

"It didn't have anything to do with Mark." Jim Bob finally offered.

"But Mark helped you to sort it out?" Derek asked to confirm.

"Yes. But... he didn't... it didn't... Mark just helped me. That's all." Jim Bob stammered nervously.

"I suppose that if you don't feel like telling me, I can ask Lonny for myself." Derek said simply.

"No! Please don't!" Jim Bob begged.

"My son is missing. I have to follow every lead that I come across to try and reconstruct what happened to him since he arrived here." Derek said seriously.

"Uncle Derek, you're a police officer, aren't you?" Joe Bob asked to confirm.

"A police detective." Derek gently corrected.

"There might be things that Jim Bob could tell his uncle that he couldn't tell a police detective, because it might end up hurting someone else." Joe Bob said carefully.

Derek nodded, then said, "I'm a police detective in Battle Creek, Michigan. I have no jurisdiction or authority here."

"But, if you found out that someone did something that... they shouldn't. Would you call the police on them?" Jim Bob asked cautiously.

"I guess it would depend on what they were doing. I certainly wouldn't overlook something serious. But I suppose that if it were something like

someone cheating on their taxes, that I might be able to look the other way." Derek said thoughtfully.

Jim Bob was lost in thought for a moment as he chewed on his lower lip. Finally he seemed to reach a decision and shook his head.

"If I ask Lonny, will he tell me?" Derek asked cautiously.

Jim Bob wouldn't meet his eyes as he said, "There's nothing for him to tell you. It was just some stuff about my piano lessons."

Derek looked at Joe Bob curiously, but got the sense that the young man had already said as much as he was going to.

After a moment to think about it, Derek decided to change tactics.

"What could I say to you that would get you to tell me what's going on?" Derek asked quietly.

"Say that you're not going to call the police, no matter what." Jim Bob muttered.

"I can't do that." Derek said simply.

Jim Bob slowly nodded that he had heard.

"You said before that you don't think that this has anything to do with Mark. Do you still believe that's true?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Yes. Lonny and Mark only talked once, for a couple minutes. And when I left, Mark went after me. Him and Lonny don't even know each other, really." Jim Bob said seriously.

Although Derek had some suspicions by this point, it wasn't enough for him to base any decision on. Finally, he reluctantly said, "Mark comes first. If a situation arises that I have to call the police to protect him or rescue him, I will call them without hesitation. But until or unless that is the case, I will promise not to call the police based on anything that you tell me."

Jim Bob mulled over the words for a few minutes before quietly responding, "Lonny was my boyfriend for... a while. Mark could see that I wasn't happy and asked Joe Bob to drive us over to Lonny's house."

"I dropped them off, then took Beau to the library." Joe Bob added.

Jim Bob nodded his agreement, then continued, "Mark talked to Lonny and... I don't know what he saw or how he figured it out, but Mark told Lonny that I wasn't happy and that if he cared about me at all, that that

would mean something to him... That's pretty much it. I left after that and Mark followed me. I'm pretty sure he never talked to Lonny again after that."

"Are you alright?" Derek asked with concern.

"Yeah. I've had some time to think about things since then. What Lonny did might be wrong and illegal, but... he can still do the right thing. He can have a good life. But if you call the police on him, then he can't." Jim Bob said frankly.

Derek slowly nodded, then quietly said, "I won't call the police and report this unless I have a good reason to."

"Thank you." Jim Bob said sincerely.

"Can any of you think of anyone else that Mark might have had contact with since his arrival?" Derek asked carefully.

"What about Greg?" Beau asked suddenly.

"Who is that?" Derek asked curiously.

"He's a friend of mine that I work with." Joe Bob said quietly, then added, "I brought him over here to meet Mark a couple days ago."

At Derek's questioning gaze, Joe Bob reluctantly continued, "Greg hit on me a few months ago and things have been weird between us ever since. I brought him over to talk to Mark because... well, I know Mark's gay but I'm still comfortable around him. I thought that maybe if I got Mark to talk to Greg, then maybe I could be comfortable around him, too."

"How did it go?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Whatever Mark said must have worked. After they talked, it was like I got my old friend back." Joe Bob said frankly.

"Do you think that there's any way I could talk to Greg for a few minutes?" Derek asked hopefully.

"Sure. He's at work right now. If it won't take too long, he should be able to take a break to talk to us." Joe Bob said thoughtfully.

Derek nodded again.

"Greg's a good guy. He wouldn't ever even think about hurting or abducting anyone." Joe Bob said firmly.

"I'll keep that in mind, but I'd still like to talk to him for myself." Derek said honestly.

"Okay. But I can tell you, he's not interested in Mark." Joe Bob said frankly, then added, "Believe me, I know what Greg looks like when he's interested."

"Is there anyone else that you can think of?" Derek asked cautiously as he looked at all three boys.

After a moment to think about it, Joe Bob finally answered for all of them, "No, Sir."

"I just need to go up and make sure that I've got the address to the resource center, then I'd like to get the addresses where I can locate Lonny and Greg." Derek said seriously.

"I'm off work today. I can drive you, if you want." Joe Bob quietly offered.

"That's very nice of you Joe Bob, but I wouldn't want to put you to the trouble." Derek said honestly.

"You're family." Joe Bob said simply, as though he had just shot down Derek's objection with incontrovertible evidence.

After a moment to consider, Derek supposed that Joe Bob actually had.

He patted his pocket to make sure that he had his phone, then said, "I'm ready when you are."

Joe Bob stood from his place on the couch and led the way out of the living room.

* * * * *

"Do you think Lonny's going to be home?" Joe Bob asked into the back seat as he drove.

"Probably. He doesn't go out much. And since he's a music teacher, he's off for the summer. But he might not be alone. He might have a student, since he gives piano lessons to make extra money." Jim Bob said a bit anxiously.

"How old *is* Lonny?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Thirty." Jim Bob quietly admitted.

"How sure are you that he's not doing to his other students what he did to you?" Derek asked as gently as he could.

"I always trusted Lonny, the whole time I was with him. It wasn't until Mark figured out that he'd been lying to me about some stuff that I ever thought anything bad about him..." Jim Bob said quietly.

"And now?" Derek asked quietly.

Jim Bob shrugged, then said, "Maybe, I guess. I never saw anything to make me think that he might be seeing someone else. But I guess he could be."

"Jim Bob, if we find anything to suggest that he's in a sexual relationship with someone underage, it's really important that we report it." Derek said frankly.

"But you promised!" Jim Bob said as his eyes welled with tears.

"And I plan to keep my promise." Derek assured him, then added, "But if we find any reason to believe that Lonny's involved in an inappropriate relationship, we need to do what's right for the next person. Not every kid is going to be able to handle it as well as you have. This could end up destroying their entire future."

After a moment, Jim Bob finally nodded his agreement to the reasoning.

"I intend to keep my promise. I won't do anything without talking to you about it first. But if we find out that there's a child in danger, then I may ask you to release me from my promise to you so that I can do the right thing for them." Derek said seriously.

"Yeah. Okay." Jim Bob finally relented.

* * * * *

"Do you want us to all go in?" Joe Bob asked as he surreptitiously glanced toward the back seat.

Derek glanced at Beau, then said, "I think that Jim Bob and I can find out everything that we need to know."

"If you want to go to the library, we can walk down there, when we're done." Jim Bob said decisively.

"Sounds good. That alright with you, Beau?" Joe Bob asked his younger brother.

"Yeah! I already read all the books I got last time!" Beau happily announced.

"Did you bring them with you?" Joe Bob asked cautiously.

"Yeah! I got my books and my comics and my army men." Beau said proudly as he held up a tattered backpack.

"That's good, Beau." Joe Bob said with a smile as he pulled up to the curb.

* * * * *

Derek was impressed that Jim Bob was able to make himself walk to the front door without hesitation, even though it was obvious that he really didn't want to.

Jim Bob glanced at Derek nervously, then knocked firmly on the door.

"Go away!" A voice called from inside.

"Lonny. Can I talk to you for a minute?" Jim Bob called in return.

Derek and Jim Bob could hear movement in the house, then the door slowly opened.

"What do you want?" Lonny asked bitterly.

From all appearances, the man hadn't shaved or bathed in several days.

"You remember my cousin Mark, don't you? He's missing. This is his dad. He just wants to talk to the people that Mark had contact with since he got here and ask them a few questions." Jim Bob said seriously.

"He's missing?" Lonny asked quietly.

"Yes. Do you have any idea where he might be?" Derek asked firmly.

"No." Lonny said simply, then pulled the door open and said, "Please, come in."

* * * * *

The smell in the house wasn't especially pleasant, but it wasn't so bad that it couldn't be tolerated.

"When was the last time you saw Mark?" Derek asked seriously.

"Last week, when he came over here with Jimmy... I'm sorry, Jim Bob." Lonny said with a regretful look at him.

"So you haven't seen or spoken with him since?" Derek asked to confirm.

"No. I talked to Jim Bob once since then, but I haven't spoken to your son at all." Lonny said honestly.

"Okay. I'm sorry for bothering you. I'm just trying to do whatever I can to track down my son." Derek said frankly.

"Of course. I understand. And if you can think of any way that I can help, please let me know." Lonny offered sincerely.

"Thanks. I will." Derek said gratefully.

"How are you, Lonny?" Jim Bob asked cautiously.

"Sorry." Lonny said simply.

"Are you going to be alright?" Jim Bob asked with concern.

"Yeah. It might take some time, but I'll get there." Lonny said confidently.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Jim Bob said quietly.

"Just be happy. If you can manage that, it'll help me out a lot." Lonny said frankly.

"Okay. You can count on it, then." Jim Bob said in the tone of a vow.

"Are you ready?" Derek asked quietly.

"Yeah. Let's go." Jim Bob said as he turned to leave, then suddenly stopped.

"I forgot to give this to you last time I was here." Jim Bob said as he took his keys out of his pocket and took one key off the ring.

"You can keep it, if you want." Lonny said quietly.

"No." Jim Bob said as he took a step forward and placed the key in Lonny's hand.

"Goodbye." Lonny said as he remained in place.

"Take care of yourself, Lonny." Jim Bob said in response, then turned to leave.

Derek glanced back at Lonny one last time before following Jim Bob out the door.

* * * * *

"Do you believe him?" Jim Bob asked as they walked down the block.

"Yes. I think I do." Derek said consideringly.

"Me, too." Jim Bob said resignedly.

"Feel like talking?" Derek asked carefully.

"If Mark were here, I might." Jim Bob said simply.

"How is that?" Derek asked curiously.

"Mark's good at figuring things out, sometimes. But other times he'll just listen and let me figure things out for myself. I usually feel better about things after I've talked to him." Jim Bob said thoughtfully.

"I can't even remember the last time I sat down and talked with him."
Derek quietly admitted.

"When you get him back, make sure that you make some time for that. It's worth it." Jim Bob said seriously.

"I'll do that." Derek said as they continued to walk.

Chapter 15: Fallen and Friend

"Isn't it your day off? You can't stay away from this place, can you? Greg asked good naturedly.

"Greg. There's someone here who'd like to talk to you when you can spare a few minutes." Joe Bob said casually over the service counter.

"Everything's caught up. We're just waiting for the lunch changeover. I can go now." Greg said easily.

* * * * *

Joe Bob led Greg into the dining room, then said, "Greg, I'd like for you to meet my Uncle Derek. He's Mark's father."

"Nice to meet you. Can I get you anything before I sit down?" Greg asked pleasantly.

"No, thank you." Derek said sincerely, then continued, "Mark's missing and I've been talking to the people that he's met since he arrived here to see if any of them have any idea of what might have happened to him."

"Mark's missing?" Greg asked with surprise.

"I'm going to go get the guys something to eat, so you two can talk. Can I get you anything?" Joe Bob asked seriously.

Derek was distracted by the question and absently said, "A coffee, if you wouldn't mind."

Joe Bob nodded, then led Jim Bob and Beau away, toward the service counter.

* * * * *

"Mark's missing?" Greg asked again.

"Yes, since night before last, as near as we can tell." Derek said frankly.

"That's horrible. I don't know anything, but if there's something I can do to help find him, just let me know." Greg said with concern.

"Thank you." Derek said sincerely, then continued, "All I really need to know, right now, is if he gave any indication that he might be planning to run away or if you noticed anything that would make you suspect that he might be in some kind of trouble."

"No. Nothing like that. Joe Bob drove us over there and left me to talk with Mark for a few minutes. I don't think he really ever said anything about himself. He just talked to me about Joe Bob." Greg said thoughtfully.

"So you didn't get a 'feeling' that Mark might be anxious about something?" Derek asked to confirm.

"No. He seemed really calm and... friendly." Greg said frankly.

"Okay. Thank you, Greg. But if you think of anything else, please let me know." Derek said hopefully as he automatically gave Greg one of his business cards.

"You're a police detective?" Greg asked in astonishment.

"Only back in Michigan. This is personal." Derek assured him.

"Oh. Okay." Greg said with relief, then added, "I hope you find Mark, safe and well. I really liked him."

"I hope so, too." Derek said honestly.

* * * * *

"Here's your coffee. Are you guys all done?" Joe Bob asked as he approached.

"I need to get back to work." Greg said as he looked back toward the kitchen.

"Thank you for talking with me." Derek said sincerely.

"If there's anything else I can do, just ask." Greg said before hurrying away.

"Are you ready to go?" Derek asked Joe Bob curiously.

"I just got the guys some breakfast... another breakfast, that is. Do you mind waiting for them to finish?" Joe Bob asked hopefully.

Derek glanced around and spotted Jim Bob and Beau at a table near the front, both enjoying their food.

"That will be fine." Derek assured him.

"Is there anything else we can do to help find Mark?" Joe Bob asked as he sat down opposite from Derek.

"Not that I can think of at the moment. So far, nothing's stood out to me as being significant. Everything that I've come across tells me that Mark ran away... except that he didn't take hardly anything with him. It really doesn't

make any sense." Derek said honestly before taking a cautious sip of his hot coffee.

"What? So is it like he was planning to just spend the night somewhere?" Joe Bob asked curiously.

"That's what it seems like. From the empty hangers in his closet and the state of the clothes in his dresser, I'd guess that he took 'something' with him, but it couldn't have been more than two changes of clothes." Derek said honestly.

"As far as I know, he hasn't met anyone but us since he's been here. The only place he's gone that wasn't with me was over to Grandpa Harlan's house." Joe Bob said thoughtfully.

"What about Priscilla? Doesn't she have a son around Mark's age?" Derek asked carefully.

"Dougie? He's a few years younger than Mark. I don't think him and Mark ever said a single word to each other. Besides that, Dougie's the kind of person that you don't really want to spend a lot of time around." Joe Bob said carefully.

"Kind of like Prissy?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Joe Bob confirmed, then thought to add, "Anyway, Prissy wouldn't go along with doing anything that might get her into trouble."

"I suppose you're right. But I'm probably going to see if I can arrange a good time to talk with the family. It's not that I suspect them of anything, but they might unwittingly know something that could be significant." Derek said frankly.

Joe Bob thought for a moment, then said, "Aunt Alma and Mark talked to each other a lot."

"I didn't even know that Alma was still alive. She was almost a hundred years old the last time I saw her." Derek said frankly.

"Yeah. She's still around, but she ain't been quite right since Uncle George passed away." Joe Bob said quietly.

"And you say that she and Mark spent a lot of time together?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Yeah. From what I heard, when she first saw Mark, she thought that he was her brother." Joe Bob said carefully.

"But he still chose to spend time with her?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I don't know how that worked out. But I thought you'd want to know that if you talk to Aunt Allie... you might not want to believe 'everything' she says." Joe Bob said carefully.

"Thanks, Joe Bob. I appreciate the heads up." Derek said honestly.

"Can I have some cookies?" Beau asked hopefully as he approached the table.

"Head on out to the car and I'll get you some." Joe Bob said with a smile at his younger brother, then looked to Derek and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yes. I'll meet you out there." Derek said warmly.

* * * * *

"Did you want to go to the LGBT resource center, next? It's not too far from here." Joe Bob asked as he started the car.

"Yes. Thank you. I appreciate you going out of your way to help me." Derek said honestly.

"Don't you worry about that, none. I'll do whatever it takes to help you find Mark." Joe Bob said seriously.

* * * * *

"Good morning, gentlemen. Oh, it's you! Welcome back!" Boyce said happily when he noticed Jim Bob.

"Hi, Boyce. You probably remember my brother, Joe Bob. This is my Uncle Derek." Jim Bob said shyly.

"Yes. It's nice to see you again, Joe Bob. How can I help you today?" Boyce asked curiously.

"You remember Mark? Well, he's missing. Uncle Derek flew down here from Michigan to try and help find him." Jim Bob said honestly.

"And you automatically think because I'm gay that I kidnapped him? Is that it?" Boyce asked cautiously.

"No. Not at all." Derek assured him, then explained, "I'm just trying to retrace Mark's steps since he arrived in town."

"Oh. Well, I don't know how much help I can be, but I'll do whatever I can. Give me just a second. I think Hugh should be in on this." Boyce said seriously, then dashed into the back room.

Derek looked around the shop, taking in every little detail, until Boyce returned, with Hugh following a step behind.

"I assume that you'd like to ask us some questions." Boyce said seriously.

"Yes. If you wouldn't mind." Derek said honestly.

"What do you want to know?" Boyce asked cautiously.

"Let me spell it out. From what I've been able to gather, Mark left, of his own accord. He packed one or two things, like he was leaving for a night or the weekend, and nobody's seen or heard from him since. There was no sign of a struggle or evidence of foul play. Considering your place in the community, I thought that maybe you might be aware of something like this happening to someone else. I was hoping you could point me in the right direction." Derek said seriously.

Hugh and Boyce looked at each other for a moment before Hugh finally said, "I don't know anything about what happened to your son, but you should know that we hear quite a bit about the coyotes and the human traffickers that run through West Texas. If it's something like that, I don't know what to tell you. When it comes to boys, the police mostly look the other way. They call them delinquents and runaways and don't even *try* to help them. They see criminals, not victims."

"It's worse when they're gay. The police assume that they somehow deserve it." Boyce quietly added.

"Do you know where I could go or who I could talk to about finding Mark and getting him back?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Anyplace I've heard about that was doing anything like that has already been closed down, and most likely reopened somewhere else, under a new name. I know that it's a shot in the dark, but maybe you could check some of the seedier clubs around town." Hugh said uncertainly.

"But I wouldn't get my hopes up too much. From what I've heard, they're pretty good about moving the kids to places where they don't know anyone and can't get any help." Boyce added frankly.

After a moment to think about it, Derek cautiously asked, "If we were to assume that's what happened to Mark, how would they 'recruit' him?"

"A lot of it's either online or sometimes it's through those multi-player video games. Of course, I've also heard of them sending a group of the kids

that they've already got under their control to 'recruit' others, you know, lure them in with the promise of sex, drugs, alcohol or money." Hugh said frankly.

"Although we're not involved in any of that, it's always possible that we might hear something. This is something of a crossroads, so to speak. Is there a number where we can get in touch if we hear something that might be relevant?" Boyce asked cautiously.

"Yes. Thank you." Derek said as he handed Boyce one of his business cards.

"You're a police detective?" Boyce asked in astonishment.

"Yes, when I'm on duty. But here and now, I'm a father." Derek said seriously.

"I promise, we'll call you if we hear anything at all." Boyce said sincerely.

"Thank you." Derek said gratefully, then led the way toward the door.

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As Joe Bob started the car, Jim Bob quietly said, "Mark wouldn't fall for something like that."

"I agree. And it doesn't make sense. He didn't have a working phone or Internet access for anyone to make contact with him." Derek said thoughtfully.

"Do you have anyplace else that you need to go? Or should I take you back to the house?" Joe Bob asked curiously.

"To the house, if you don't mind. I need to sit down and think about this for a while. The pieces aren't fitting together." Derek said distractedly.

"Just be sure to call us if there's anything that we can do to help." Joe Bob said seriously.

Derek smiled, then said, "Thank you for all that you've done today. I promise that I'll call if I think of anything."

"Do you think Mark's gonna be alright?" Beau asked from the back seat.

"I don't know, Beau. I hope so." Derek said gravely.

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The ride continued on in silence until they finally arrived at the house.

After dropping Derek off at the front door, Joe Bob started driving back up the lane.

"Do you think Mark's alright?" Beau asked his brother quietly.

"I don't know." Joe Bob said honestly.

"We should've gone upstairs to see if Enoch was still there." Beau said seriously.

Jim Bob looked at Beau strangely at the statement.

"If Mark's gone, Enoch is, too. Mark wouldn't ever go anywhere without him." Joe Bob said seriously.

Although Jim Bob was curious, he could tell from Joe Bob's tone of voice that now was not the time to ask what he was talking about.

Beau considered Joe Bob's words, then seemed to accept his answer.

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Since his ex-wife's car wasn't parked out front, Derek knew that she wasn't home, yet.

He went into the kitchen and fixed himself something simple for lunch as he thought about all that he had learned about his son since his arrival.

He barely even tasted the food as his mind went over and over all the little details.

Finally, he went upstairs, still feeling that there was something in the bedroom, some clue, that he was still overlooking.

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"Dad looks stressed out." Mark said quietly.

"I still cannot think of anything we could do to alleviate his worry." Enoch said regretfully.

The boys watched as Derek made his way around the room, carefully examining everything that he encountered.

"Maybe, if we can pull him into a dream, we can get him to pull us both through the opening." Mark said uncertainly.

"Perhaps. But there is no guarantee that I could draw him into our dream place. And even if I could, there is the further possibility that he would not be able to believe or accept what we were telling him." Enoch said regretfully.

"Yeah. That's a lot of 'what-ifs'." Mark agreed.

"I'm sorry, Mark." Derek said under his breath as he sat down in the desk chair, seeming to accept his defeat.

"You don't have to be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong." Mark said in response, even though he knew that his father couldn't hear him.

Enoch draped an arm around Mark and held him firmly.

"I was right there, in the same house with you. I don't know how I let myself get distracted from what's most important. I never meant to hurt you." Derek said in anguish.

"You didn't hurt me." Mark said quickly, then realized that something was wrong. "I'm not crying. I should be crying."

"You can't cry, here." Enoch explained quietly.

"Oh. I didn't know that." Mark said softly.

Enoch gave him a gentle kiss to try and comfort him.

"When you came out to us... I should have reacted better. I should have told you that I love you and... so many other things. I never told you how proud I was." Derek said regretfully.

"You were?" Mark asked with surprise, then slowly asked, "Proud of what?"

"I should have told you 'why'." Derek said under his breath in a voice so low that Mark and Enoch moved closer, so that they could hear.

"I should have told you..." Derek was saying then he looked up, as if he had heard something.

Before Mark or Enoch knew what was happening, Derek was up out of the chair and leaving the room.

"What happened?" Mark asked in confusion.

"If I were to guess, I would say that someone probably knocked at the front door." Enoch said honestly.

"Oh." Mark said thoughtfully, then quietly asked, "What do you think he was about to say?"

"I have no idea." Enoch said honestly.

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"Hello. Is this a good time?"

"Yes. It's good to see you again, Oz. It's a perfect time." Derek said as he stepped back to invite Oz into the house.

"How are things going? Made any progress?" Oz asked curiously.

"I've talked to a few people, but I can't say that I'm any closer than when I started. But I was wanting to ask you about the clubs around town. I've been told that a few of them... I don't know how to ask this, but it's been suggested that Mark might have been taken by human traffickers and may be... um..." Derek trailed off, not knowing how to say what he wanted to.

"Actually, I might have come across something, but I'll need to see your son's bedroom before I can say for sure." Oz said carefully.

"Why do you need to see his bedroom?" Derek asked cautiously.

"I just do. Can I see it, or not?" Oz asked seriously.

"Yes. Of course. It's right up here." Derek said as he led the way toward the stairs.

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"Here it is." Derek said as he opened the door and stepped aside.

Oz took a step into the room, then looked around before saying, "Yeah. Okay."

"What?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Before I can tell you what I know, we need to come to an understanding." Oz said firmly.

"What do you want?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Here's the deal. If I get your son back then you keep quiet about where he's been. It'll be up to you to come up with a good story that people will believe. If you can't do that, then I can't help you." Oz said seriously.

"I could have you arrested for child abduction, or at the very least, aiding and abetting." Derek countered.

"I suppose you *could* do that. But then you'd lose what might be your only chance of ever seeing him again." Oz said coldly, not showing the slightest hint of being intimidated.

"Is that a threat?" Derek asked cautiously.

"No. It's an inconvenient fact. But you not wanting to believe it doesn't make it any less true." Oz said frankly.

"But, if I agree, what's to stop you from abducting other kids? How can I consider promising something like that, just to save *my own* son?" Derek asked in a conflicted tone.

"Listen. I didn't abduct him. I had nothing to do with the choices that he faced or the decisions that he made. If you find out that I'm lying about that, then our deal is off and you can feel free to tell anyone you want about what you discover. But right now, I'm giving you a chance, *one* chance, to get your son back. What happens next is completely up to you." Oz said seriously.

"What do I have to do?" Derek asked nearly under his breath.

"Just promise to keep your mouth shut. That's it." Oz said frankly.

Derek's mind quickly went back through what he'd been able to discover so far. He didn't have a single lead that had any real hope of panning out.

From what he knew of things, what Oz was saying might well be true. This might be his one and only chance to ever see his son again.

"Okay. Whatever it is, I promise, I won't tell anyone." Derek reluctantly agreed, bracing himself for whatever horror was about to be revealed to him.

Oz walked across the room, then squatted down slightly before extending his hand.

Derek watched in confusion, then had to fight to believe his eyes as another hand suddenly appeared in Oz's.

"Come on out, Mark." Oz said as he began to pull.

Derek staggered back and was fortunately able to find his way into the desk chair before his knees gave way.

Out of literal 'nothingness', Mark's upper body began to emerge.

"How the *hell* did you manage to get yourself in there, anyway?" Oz asked irritably as he continued to pull.

"It wasn't easy." Mark said as he struggled to get the rest of his body free.

"Mark?" Derek asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. Just a minute, Dad." Mark said as he was finally able to get his feet under him.

"What?..." Derek began to say, but realized that the myriad of questions that he had couldn't be asked beyond that one word.

Mark reached out his arm, much as Oz had done, and out of the 'nothingness' a backpack appeared in his hand.

As soon as his backpack was on the ground, Mark once again thrust his hand out and Derek was amazed to see another hand grab onto him.

"Come on, E. You've got to push." Mark said as he pulled.

Derek watched in wide eyed wonder as his son was pulling on a disembodied arm with all his might.

"He's stuck." Mark said past clenched teeth.

"Let go, Mark. I'll work something out to get him through. Besides, I still haven't been able to get everything arranged for him." Oz said frankly.

"No way! If Enoch can't come through with me, then I'll go back until you can get us *both* out!" Mark said firmly.

Oz held Mark's gaze for a long moment before finally saying, "Fine! Move out of the way."

Although Mark was reluctant to let go of Enoch, even for an instant, he still had enough faith in Oz to follow his instructions.

As soon as Mark had stepped away, Oz held out his hand and the disembodied hand once again appeared in his.

Oz looked over toward Derek and said, "You *didn't* see this."

Derek dumbly nodded.

As Oz continued to hold the hand, he began to glow and his appearance began to change.

Large dark wings slowly became visible on his back and he became taller and more muscular.

"Come on. Get out of there." Oz said, then gave a firm yank.

In a sudden **::woosh::**, there stood Enoch, every bit as wide eyed and disbelieving as Derek.

Mark smiled with relief and hurried to Enoch to pull him into his arms.

As he did, he felt Enoch go slack as he fell unconscious.

"Oz? Something's wrong with E." Mark said in panic.

"He's in shock. Get him into bed, under the blanket and crawl in next to him to keep him warm. He should be fine in a few minutes." Oz said seriously.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Derek asked as he watched his son help the unknown young man into the bed.

"Something warm to drink probably wouldn't hurt." Oz said absently as he kept close watch on Mark and Enoch.

Derek nodded, then hurried out of the room.

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As soon as Mark had Enoch settled, he turned to Oz and asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"For nearly a hundred years, he's been existing in limbo. During that time he didn't have to eat, drink, sleep, breathe or anything else." Oz said seriously.

"Yeah, so?" Mark asked cautiously.

"Try turning over a car engine after it's been sitting idle for a hundred years and see how much luck you have with it." Oz said frankly.

"But you said he's going to be alright?" Mark asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Just give him a minute." Oz assured him.

Mark gave Enoch a quick kiss as he cuddled him close, then turned to Oz and quietly said, "I thought we had it all figured out when we decided to spend eternity together."

"Yeah. About that. Even if there were a way to work around the whole 'holy light' problem, it still wouldn't have been a good idea. Limbo is a place to stop along the way, it isn't a destination." Oz said frankly.

"I think we could have been happy there." Mark said frankly.

"You know how you don't have to eat or sleep when you're there?" Oz asked cautiously.

"Yeah."

"No orgasms, either. It's a physiological response that becomes completely inactive in limbo." Oz said seriously.

"Oh..." Mark said as he looked back at Enoch.

"Mark?" Enoch asked in a weak whisper.

"How are you doing, E?" Mark asked with a smile, relieved that Enoch seemed to be recovering.

"Is it really true? Did we really make it?" Enoch asked hopefully.

"Yes. We really did. Everything's going to be alright now." Mark said joyfully as he hugged Enoch firmly.

"Actually, that remains to be seen." Oz said cautiously.

"What's wrong?" Mark asked as he turned slightly to look at Oz again.

Rather than answer, Oz pointed toward the bedroom door.

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As Derek walked into the bedroom, he realized that everyone was looking at him.

"Did I miss something?" Derek asked as he placed a cup of hot tea on the edge of the desk.

"For the past few days, I've been arranging things and nudging them to go in the right direction... and keeping a certain blabby kid from telling you about Enoch, too early. But now that we're all here, in the same dimension, there are some things that need to be sorted out." Oz said frankly.

"Enoch, would you like some tea?" Mark asked gently.

"Yes. Please." Enoch said quietly, looking to be much more stable than he'd been earlier.

"What things?" Derek asked cautiously.

After helping Enoch to sit up, Mark handed him the cup of tea as he said, "Enoch doesn't officially exist. Mom's taking a job in New Mexico, you live in Michigan and as far as I know, I'm still living here in Texas. That's not going to work."

"What do you want to do about it?" Derek asked quietly.

"Let's look at what we *can* do, first." Oz suggested seriously.

"With Mom taking a new job, I don't think there's any way she'd agree to take on another kid." Mark said frankly.

"And you couldn't tell her about who Enoch *really* is. She couldn't handle it." Oz interjected.

"But you told *me*." Derek said cautiously.

"Yeah. Well, that wasn't my first choice, but with the way things turned out, it's the only way I could see to make this work." Oz said frankly.

"So, you two could come to Michigan and live with me." Derek suggested hesitantly.

"Do you want us to?" Mark asked his father seriously.

"Yes! Of course!" Derek said immediately.

Mark smiled at his father's reaction, then quietly said, "Then let's do that."

"But we still need to find a way to *explain* Enoch being here." Oz said seriously.

Derek thought for a moment, then said, "I know a few people, back in Michigan, who can make that happen."

"Dad?! Are you talking about doing something illegal?" Mark asked with surprise.

"Only a little. I mean, I assume that Enoch's an American citizen." Derek said, then looked at Enoch with question.

"Yes. I was born in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1883." Enoch said quietly.

"There you go. So, we're just going to get him the documentation to prove that he belongs here." Derek said with an uncomfortable smile.

Although Mark was uneasy about asking his father to do something that was *clearly* illegal, he couldn't help but agree that it was for the greater good and didn't really hurt anyone.

"Well, if you're going to be doing that in Michigan, you might not want to fly. I can't see that going well." Oz said frankly.

Derek nodded his agreement.

"So, I guess the big question is, what do we tell Mom?" Mark asked anxiously.

"I'll let you guys work that out. It sounds like you've got everything you need, so I'll be on my way." Oz said frankly.

"Before you go... What the hell are you?" Derek asked cautiously.

"It's funny you should mention hell..." Oz said with a smirk, then spread his wings as he faded from sight.

Chapter 16: Altering That Which Is Certain

"What?" Derek asked in confusion.

"He's an angel. Don't worry about that now. We've got to get our stories straight before Mom gets home... where is she, anyway?" Mark asked curiously.

"Out running some errands." Derek said with a shrug.

"How can we get her to let me go with you?" Mark asked anxiously.

"From what she told me, you were upset with her about having to move to New Mexico." Derek said in a leading tone.

"Yeah. I mean, it's not like New Mexico is a big deal or anything, I just didn't want to have to leave Enoch." Mark said simply.

"Right." Derek said slowly, then cautiously asked, "Where *were* you, anyway?"

"Right over there." Mark said as he pointed across the room, then added, "Except in another dimension."

"I should have paid more attention to the Twilight Zone." Derek said absently.

"What you really need to know is that about a hundred years ago, Enoch got trapped in limbo and has been here in this room ever since. I guess that after a while, he learned how to move things in this world, so that's why everyone thought that this room was haunted. Now he's back and he needs a place to live and someone to help him get used to the twenty-first century and stuff like that." Mark said frankly.

"And I need to stay with you. Without you, I might as well have stayed in limbo." Enoch said gently.

Mark smiled at the comment, then moved in to give Enoch a firm kiss.

"How about this? We tell your mother... and anyone else who asks, that Mark didn't run away. He found out that Enoch was in trouble and was trying to help him. I found both of you and brought you back here. Enoch doesn't have any family... does he?" Derek thought to ask.

"None of whom I am aware." Enoch said quietly.

"So I'm going to see to it that he gets placed with a good family." Derek continued.

"You're not putting Enoch in a foster home!" Mark said firmly.

"*Our* good family. I'm just saying that that's my *official* motivation. That's the story we'll use while we're here. Once we get to Michigan, we won't have to explain most of this. We can just tell people that I went to Texas and adopted a son." Derek said simply.

"Can you really do that?" Mark asked cautiously.

"I'm pretty sure I know who to talk to to make it work." Derek said thoughtfully.

"So, what are we telling Mom, again?" Mark asked nervously.

"How about you tell her that I said that I'd really like it if you came to live with me? And that since she's starting a new life in New Mexico, this way she can focus on her new job and get things set up for herself. Then, when she's ready, maybe you can come back down and spend the summer or Christmas with her." Derek said seriously.

"Do you think that she'll go for that?" Mark asked uncertainly.

"Your mom can be a fairly reasonable person. I think that if you speak to her practicality and let her know that you aren't doing this because you're mad at her, that she *might*." Derek said honestly.

"What about the custody thing? Is that going to be a problem?" Mark asked anxiously.

"No. Your mother and I agreed on the terms of the custody and the judge signed off on it. If we can get her to go along with this, then there shouldn't be any reason that the judge would have a problem." Derek said frankly.

"Where are we going to live? You sold the house, didn't you?" Mark asked thoughtfully.

"Yes. I've got a studio apartment that I just moved into. It's got a bed and a hide-a-bed sofa, so we'll all have places to sleep." Derek said thoughtfully.

"And NO privacy." Mark said with a dire look at his father.

"I admit that it won't work for the long term, but we'll find a way to manage until we can get something better." Derek assured his son.

"How are we going to get back to Michigan?" Mark asked carefully.

"Oh yeah. Oz was right about that. We can't fly, not until Enoch has ID..."

"When you speak of flying, do you mean as in a hot air balloon or a blimp?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"No... but if we could do that someday, it might be nice." Mark said with a smile, then continued, "Nowadays we have airplanes. They're kind of hard to explain, but I'm sure you'll get to see lots of them before we get to Michigan."

"When will we be leaving?" Enoch asked timidly.

"I'm going to need to investigate whether it's cheaper to rent a car or buy a decent used one for the trip." Derek said frankly.

"Whatever you get, make sure it has air conditioning. I can't believe how hot it gets here." Mark said honestly.

"The heat was a bit of a rude surprise for me, as well." Enoch agreed.

"How are you feeling, now?" Derek asked with concern.

"Much better, however, I am afraid that I am in dire need of a visit to the water closet." Enoch said timidly.

"That means the bathroom." Mark explained to his father, then asked Enoch, "Do you feel strong enough to walk there?"

"I am willing to try, although I may be a bit unsteady." Enoch said honestly.

"I'll be right there with you, every step of the way." Mark assured him.

"Are you feeling hungry, at all? I can fix you something to eat." Derek hesitantly offered.

"Not that I am aware." Enoch said cautiously.

"Go ahead and fix something, he's a teenage guy. If he's not hungry now, he probably will be by the time it's ready." Mark said confidently.

"Let me help you to the bathroom first, then I'll fix something." Derek said decisively.

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Enoch was unsteady on his feet, but by the time he reached the end of the hall, he was able to stand on his own.

"Are you going to be alright in there?" Mark asked as he stopped at the bathroom door.

"I believe so, but..." Enoch trailed off anxiously.

"I'll go in with you, if you want." Mark offered quickly.

A smile of relief crossed Enoch's face, and that was all the answer that Mark needed.

"You guys yell for me if you need my help with anything. I'm going to be downstairs making us a late lunch." Derek said warmly.

"Thanks, Dad." Mark said with appreciation at the offer.

"Would there be any way..." Enoch began to ask, then seemed to think better of it.

"What is it, E?" Mark asked gently.

"If it wouldn't be a terrible imposition, could I possibly take a bath?" Enoch asked hopefully.

"Sure. If you'll go in and take care of your business, I'll go and get us some clothes so that we can shower... *together*." Mark said happily.

"Thank you." Enoch said sincerely, then muttered, "I must go."

"Go on. I'll be back in a minute." Mark assured him.

"When you guys are done, I'll be waiting on you downstairs, with lunch." Derek said warmly.

"Thanks, Dad." Mark said before hurrying back to his bedroom.

"Thank you, Mr. Taylor." Enoch said timidly before hurrying into the bathroom.

Derek smiled, then walked casually back toward the stairs. He had an idea of how long it might take for the boys to shower, so he knew that he didn't have to hurry.

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"I didn't get any phone calls from you, did you have any errands that you needed to run?" Pat asked as she walked into the kitchen.

"No. No errands." Derek said cautiously, then turned to look at his ex-wife before carefully saying, "I found Mark."

"You did? How is he? Is he safe? Where is he?" Pat asked excitedly.

"He's fine. He's upstairs taking a shower." Derek assured her.

As she began to hurry out of the room, Derek called after her, "Just let him finish his shower and you can talk to him about it when he comes down for lunch."

Pat stopped on the second stair step, and although it was apparent that she wanted to go and see her son immediately, she was able to make herself turn around and go back to the kitchen.

* * * * *

"What happened to him? Where was he? Why did he run away?" Pat asked as she looked around at the meal that Derek was preparing.

"Mark didn't run away. He found a boy who was in trouble and he was trying to help him. I can't really go into too much detail about that except to say that Enoch has lost the rest of his family and needs someone to take care of him." Derek said cautiously as he went back to slicing tomatoes.

"Let me do that." Pat said impatiently and nudged him out of the way. Derek knew better than to argue and stepped away from the cutting board.

"But Mark's alright?" Pat asked as she took over the lunch preparation.

"He's perfectly fine, except for being worried about Enoch." Derek said simply.

She turned to look at her ex-husband for a moment before cautiously asking, "What is it that you're not telling me?"

"Enoch's upstairs with Mark, right now... showering with him." Derek said tentatively.

Pat thought about that for a moment, then quietly asked, "They're a couple?"

"Yes. It seems that while Mark was trying to help him, they formed a very strong attachment." Derek said carefully.

Pat looked around at the food, having lost her place in what she was doing, then she asked, "If they're 'boyfriends'... how is that going to work?"

"That's something that we're going to need to discuss." Derek said honestly. The sound of laughter on the stairs interrupted them.

"It's a lot easier in the light, isn't it?" They heard Mark saying playfully.

* * * * *

"Mom?!" Mark said in surprise as he led the way into the kitchen.

"How are you?" Pat asked with concern.

"Hungry." Mark answered seriously, then added, "Besides that, I'm fine."

"I was just explaining things to your mother. Why don't you boys sit down at the table? The food should be ready in just a minute." Derek said as he looked his son in the eyes, silently begging him to go along with it.

"Um, sure." Mark said then automatically took a seat at the kitchen table.

Enoch timidly followed and took the seat next to him.

"So, where were you?" Pat asked firmly.

"That's something they really can't talk about." Derek said before either boy could formulate an answer.

"Are they in some kind of trouble?" Pat asked with concern.

"No. Not anymore." Derek assured her, then added, "But if we want to *keep* them out of trouble, we can't discuss where they've been or what happened to them."

"Why not?" Pat asked cautiously.

"I can't tell you that." Derek said frankly, then glanced at the boys and winked.

Mark and Enoch were surprised, but were content to watch the master at work.

"Alright... I guess... For now... But what are we going to do next?" Pat asked in an aggravated tone.

"Eat lunch." Mark volunteered happily.

"Are you hungry yet, Enoch?" Derek asked the timid boy, sitting beside his son.

"Yes, Sir. Mark was right. After a short time, my hunger made itself known." Enoch said quietly.

"It's on it's way." Pat said simply, then continued, "What I was asking is, how is this going to impact the plans that we've already made?"

"I was thinking that, if you'd allow it, we could get the custody decree modified and Mark could come and stay with me." Derek said hopefully.

"Why would we want to do that?" Pat asked cautiously as she placed empty plates around the table, in front of each person.

"The way I see it, there really isn't any good way that Enoch could go with you to New Mexico. There would be too many questions that you wouldn't be able to answer about his origin and things like that. I'm fairly confident that I could manage to get him the documentation that he'll need to get around and function in society." Derek said carefully.

Pat placed platters of sandwich fixings in the middle of the table as she said, "Without knowing more about Enoch's situation, I'll grant you that."

Derek seemed relieved by her concession and quickly added, "Enoch needs to be with Mark, not only to help Enoch get used to how things are done here, but also because both of them would be miserable if they were kept apart."

Pat slightly nodded, but didn't say anything in response.

"Then there's your new job. You're just getting established. If Mark and Enoch are with me, that'll leave you free to do everything you need to do to get things set up with your new life." Derek said encouragingly as he took bread from the bag on the table and started to assemble a sandwich for himself.

Once again, Pat slowly nodded as she ferried jars of condiments to the table.

"Of course, once you've got everything settled, then we can talk about the boys coming down for a visit or possibly even to stay during the summer break. We'll just have to see how things are going when that time comes." Derek said thoughtfully.

When his father had finished making his selections, Mark took pieces of bread for both himself and Enoch from the bread bag, then silently pointed at things, encouraging Enoch to build himself a sandwich.

"How is that going to work with *your* job? You won't be able to be there with them. You're working all the time." Pat asked seriously.

"How old are you, Enoch?" Derek asked curiously.

"Fourteen, Sir." Enoch said timidly as he was trying to identify all the things that Mark was offering him.

"So am I!" Mark said happily. He had known that Enoch was close to his own age, but they'd never discussed his 'exact' age before.

"I think the boys are mature and responsible enough that they don't need me watching over them every minute of the day. And they'll always be able to call me on my cellphone if they need anything." Derek said confidently, before taking a bite of his sandwich.

"This is a lot for me to take on faith. It would be a lot easier for me to decide if I knew all of what was going on." Pat said frankly, then opened a bag of potato chips and placed it in the center of the table, within easy reach of everyone.

"I know. And I'm sorry about that." Derek said honestly, then continued, "But this is one of those situations where the best thing that we can do is pick ourselves up and move forward without looking back."

"What is the chance that whatever you're not telling me is going to come back to haunt us, later?" Pat asked anxiously as she got up from the table and walked to the refrigerator.

"I can't promise that that won't ever happen. But from what I've seen, I think everything else has been resolved. If we just leave it be, the entire future can be open to us. We just have to decide what we want to do next, to make everyone as happy as possible." Derek said cautiously.

Pat returned to the table with a gallon jug of sweet tea, then walked back to the cupboard to get glasses for everyone.

"All I care about is being with Enoch. Whether it's here or New Mexico or Michigan doesn't really matter to me. We'll deal." Mark said seriously before helping himself to some potato chips. When he noticed Enoch's uncertain look, he grabbed another handful of the chips and deposited them on Enoch's plate.

Derek considered Mark's words, then nodded his agreement.

"But I think what Dad said sounds right. If we went to Michigan, Mom could get her new job started and get things done the way she wants them without having to worry about what me and Enoch are doing. And when she's finished, then we could visit or even move to New Mexico, if that's what everyone wants." Mark said thoughtfully.

"It's true. It might be easier for me to get settled." Pat reluctantly admitted.

Mark looked around the table, then asked, "So, what do we need to do to make it happen?"

"I think the first thing that I need to do is some investigation about the best way to get the boys back up to Michigan. Since Enoch doesn't have any documentation, we can't fly." Derek said thoughtfully.

"He's an illegal alien?" Pat asked with surprise.

"No, Mom. He's from here. He just doesn't have any paperwork to prove it." Mark quickly explained.

"That's right. And I should be able to take care of that fairly easily when we get back to Battle Creek. I'm just not sure who I would talk to about it here, and besides, it would probably take more time than I have to deal with it before we leave." Derek said frankly.

Pat reluctantly nodded, seeing the sense of what he was saying.

"Do you know of anyplace where I could buy a used car that's in decent condition, so I could drive it back to Michigan?" Derek asked his ex-wife hopefully.

"Dad or Joe Bob might know of someplace, but from what I've heard, buying a used car around here can be kind of tricky. Even though the body might be in nearly perfect condition, the heat causes the engines to fail long before their time." Pat said thoughtfully.

"Yes. I remember hearing something about that." Derek said thoughtfully, then added, "It would probably be best for me to rent a car, then. So not only do I have the peace of mind, knowing that I'm not buying someone else's problems, but if there *is* any trouble on the drive, I can just contact the rental company and they can provide us a replacement."

"Even if it costs a little more overall, I think that makes the most sense." Pat agreed, then thought to ask, "When are you thinking of leaving?"

"There are a few things that we'll need to take care of locally before we leave. We'll have to get the custody sorted out and other legal matters." Derek said seriously.

"You should know that, on one of my errands today, I had my name officially changed. So when you're doing any legal paperwork, make sure to list me as Patricia James." Pat said seriously.

"I'll keep that in mind." Derek assured her.

"Enoch's going to need some new clothes." Mark interjected before his parents could get everything planned.

Pat looked at her son with surprise.

"I mean, he can share mine, if he wants. I think we're close enough to the same size. But most of E's clothes are... like that." Mark said reluctantly as he gestured to Enoch, then continued, "And besides that, he's going to need things of his own."

"I am accustomed to making due with what is available. There is no need for you to spend money on me." Enoch said timidly.

Pat looked at her son's boyfriend and took stock of his appearance.

The boy was a beauty, there was no doubt. His creamy green eyes immediately drew her attention. But his clothing, although neat and clean, had definitely seen better days.

"I don't think it would be any problem for us to spend a *little* money to update your wardrobe." Pat said to Enoch with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. And that would be one less thing for people to notice. Until we have all your legalities in place, I'd rather not do anything to draw attention to you." Derek said honestly.

"So, what are we doing now?" Mark asked his parents cautiously.

"I suppose that I could talk to someone about modifying the custody arrangement. As soon as I know what we need to do and who we need to talk to, I could call you with that information." Pat said thoughtfully.

"And I could go ahead and get the rental car. That way we'll have it whenever we need to go somewhere." Derek said seriously.

"Do you want for me to drive you out to the airport so you can get that done?" Pat asked as she started gathering their lunch dishes.

"Only if it's not going to be too far out of your way." Derek said cautiously.

"It'll only take a few extra minutes. And then you'll be able to go wherever you want whenever you need to. I'll think of it as an investment." Pat said with a grin.

"If you're sure it's no trouble." Derek reluctantly agreed.

"Come on, E. Let's see what we can find for you to wear." Mark said happily.

"Thank you for the meal. It was very good." Enoch said timidly as he stood.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Enoch." Pat said sincerely.

* * * * *

"That went a lot better than I expected." Mark said frankly as they walked up the stairs.

"I believe it would not have been so if not for your father. He was somehow able to deflect some of the most inconvenient questions." Enoch said honestly.

"Yeah. I guess being a cop, he has to be good at stuff like that." Mark said as they crested the stairs.

"He has gone to such trouble on my behalf. I cannot think of how to repay him for his generosity." Enoch said quietly.

"Try thinking about it this way. He's going through all of this stuff so that you can stay here with us and be part of our family. So the best thing that you can do to repay him is *be* part of our family and prove to him that what he went through was worth it." Mark said seriously as he led the way into the bedroom.

Enoch thought about the words for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"Get naked for me." Mark said with a grin.

"Pardon?" Enoch asked in astonishment.

"I know you're used to wearing your own clothes, but we need to get you ready to go into town, so you're going to need something a *little* bit more modern." Mark explained.

"Oh. So this isn't simply because you want to look at my naked body?" Enoch asked as he began to undress.

"I didn't say that." Mark said with a smile.

* * * * *

"So, what aren't you telling me?" Pat asked, once she and Derek were alone.

"I'm not telling you what I *can't* tell you." Derek said honestly.

"And just *what* is that supposed to mean?" Pat asked seriously.

Derek sighed heavily, then said, "It means that in rescuing Mark and Enoch, I had to agree to certain conditions. I believe that if I were to break that agreement, there would be consequences."

"What *exactly* does that mean?" Pat pressed.

"I honestly don't know. And what's more, I don't care to find out. All we're being asked to do is not talk about it, not think about it, and pretend it never happened. If we can do that, then we'll be free to live our lives and do whatever else we want." Derek said frankly.

"Do you really take it that seriously?" Pat asked cautiously.

"Let's just say that today I witnessed something that impressed me, and leave it at that." Derek said as he looked her in the eyes.

"What about this boy... Enoch? Is there any chance that he's going to hurt Mark?" Pat asked anxiously.

"There's always that chance, when you're in love. But I don't think Enoch poses any greater threat than anyone else that Mark might fall in love with. I mean, yes, he has a few challenges to face, but who doesn't? I think that Mark helping him to overcome them will only make the two of them grow stronger as a couple." Derek said assuringly.

"He does seem to be a very nice boy... very respectful." Pat said consideringly.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Mark will get him past that." Derek said with a grin.

"How does he look?" Mark asked as he hurried down the stairs.

Pat and Derek looked up to see Enoch walking down the stairs, much more slowly, wearing jeans and a tee shirt.

"Uncomfortable." Derek said frankly.

"Embarrassed." Pat said at the same time.

Mark looked at them with confusion, then back at Enoch.

"I know that you say this is proper. However, I feel ill at ease exposing my undergarments in public." Enoch said anxiously.

"It's a tee shirt. It's not like you're sagging or anything like that." Mark said frankly.

"Maybe you should let Enoch wear one of your button up shirts, if that would make him more comfortable." Pat suggested gently.

"We tried that. His shoulders are too big. We're going to need to get him the next bigger size." Mark said frankly.

"Go ahead and help yourself to one of mine." Derek said easily.

"I would not want to inconvenience you by borrowing your clothing." Enoch immediately objected.

"You can either borrow a shirt of mine to wear for as long as it takes for us to buy you some of your own, or you can wear the tee shirt and feel like you're walking around half naked. It's up to you." Derek said frankly.

"I will borrow one of your shirts. Thank you very much, Sir." Enoch said timidly.

"That's not going to work." Mark said seriously.

"Why not?" Derek asked cautiously.

"The shirt thing is fine. But Enoch calling you 'Sir' like that, it's gonna make people look twice." Mark said seriously.

After a moment to consider, Derek quietly said, "He may be right."

"How would you prefer that I address you?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"You said that Enoch's going to be part of our family, right?" Mark asked reasonably.

"Yes." Derek cautiously agreed.

"Then he should call you 'Dad'. Anything else is going to cause people to ask questions." Mark said firmly.

"I could not..." Enoch began to say.

"If you start talking about uncles and cousins and stuff like that, there's lots of questions that people can ask about your parents and why you're here with us. If you say that Dad's your dad and I'm your brother, then that shuts it all down. When they see your hair and green eyes they might ask if you're adopted. But then you just tell them 'yes' and that should be the end of it. You're a part of our family, end of story." Mark said seriously.

"I would feel as though I am encroaching on your relationship with your father." Enoch said quietly.

"No. You'd be confirming your relationship with *our* father." Mark said simply.

"Don't pressure him, Mark. If Enoch doesn't want to be my son, it wouldn't be right to force him." Derek said sternly.

"No. I did not say that I objected to being considered as though I were your son. I simply did not want for you to feel that you had to include me in your

family in such a way. I would be content to be considered a more distant relation." Enoch hurried to explain.

"Enoch, whether we call you my son or my nephew or a friend of the family, you're still my son's boyfriend and I'm going to consider you to be just like my son. Go ahead and figure out what you want, but I'm going to think of you as my son, no matter what you decide." Derek said seriously.

"That being the case, I will gratefully accept the honor of being regarded as one of your children and would like to address you as 'Father' if you would allow it." Enoch said sincerely.

"I think that 'Dad' would probably make me more comfortable. If people hear you calling me 'Father', they're going to think that I'm a priest." Derek said frankly.

"I do not know if I could address you as... 'Dad'. It seems diminutive and somewhat disrespectful." Enoch said in a conflicted tone.

"Go ahead and call me 'Father' if that's most comfortable for you, but if you ever feel like calling me 'Dad', you'll already know that it's okay with me. You won't have to ask." Derek assured him.

Mark turned to his mother and cautiously asked, "What do you want for Enoch to call you?"

Pat considered for a moment, then said, "I suppose that if he's going to be your adoptive brother, that it would make the most sense for him to call me 'Mom'."

Mark looked toward Enoch, ready to shoot down his objection, but was surprised to find him standing frozen, with tears filling his eyes.

"It's okay if you want to, E. I don't mind sharing a mom with you." Mark gently encouraged.

"I am certain that there is a reason that doing so would be improper." Enoch said in a conflicted tone.

"Yeah. Well, until you can figure out what that reason is, why not just go with it?" Mark asked with a gentle smile.

Enoch found himself unable to speak and simply nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

* * * * *

"Is everybody ready to go?" Pat asked seriously.

"Enoch still needs to change." Mark answered quickly.

"Go ahead." Derek encouraged.

"I would feel uneasy going through your personal belongings." Enoch said in a conflicted tone.

"Yeah. Actually, I would, too." Mark quietly admitted.

Derek turned to his ex-wife and said, "We'll be down in a minute."

"I need to gather some legal documents, anyway. I'll meet you back down here when you're ready." Pat said before starting up the stairs.

* * * * *

"How did we do?" Mark asked when they were all in the bedroom.

"I think we're okay. I told your mom enough to keep her from asking you too many questions. But if she *does* ask you something, just be firm in saying that you can't talk about it." Derek said as he opened his suitcase.

"I would like to thank you for all the trouble you are going to on my behalf." Enoch said timidly.

"I think that there's always a lot to do to add a new member to the family. At least this time, we don't have to worry about diapers." Derek said with a smile as he held out a white tee shirt for Enoch.

Mark laughed at the statement, then added, "And you don't have to plan a big fancy wedding, either."

"Yes. I fell for that *once*. Next time, it's the JP, all the way." Derek agreed.

After taking off the printed tee shirt and putting on the white one, Enoch accepted a white button up shirt from Derek.

"Who knows that I was missing? We should probably let them know that I've been found." Mark said thoughtfully.

"I hadn't thought of that. You had lots of people worried about you. We should tell them that you're alright." Derek said seriously.

"I'm sorry that I made people worry. It seemed like the right thing to do, at the time." Mark said honestly.

"Let's just accept that you did what you thought was right and let it go at that." Derek told his son gently, then added, "But I hope that you know that whatever happens from here on out, you can come to me and I'll do my best to help you."

"Yeah. I got that." Mark said with a smile.

Derek smiled at his son's casual, but sincere, response.

"Hey, E. That looks nice! Now I feel underdressed. Let me change, too." Mark said quickly.

Enoch smiled at Mark's words and waited as he quickly changed into a white button up shirt.

* * * * *

"Don't you look nice! I need to get a picture!" Pat said with delight.

"Until Enoch is more comfortable in casual clothes, I think we'll probably be dressing like this a lot." Mark said shyly.

After a moment of digging in her purse, Pat came up with her phone and promptly took half a dozen pictures of Enoch and Mark, posed by the staircase.

"Did you get everything that you needed?" Derek asked when she seemed to be finished.

"I think so. I'm probably not going to be able to get much done on my own, but at least I should be able to find out what documentation I need and who needs to be present." Pat said decisively as she put her phone away.

"While we were upstairs, Mark was saying that we might want to get in contact with everyone who was worried about him and let them know that he's okay." Derek said seriously as he started walking toward the door, with Pat leading the way.

"Good idea. You can make the phone calls while I'm driving, if you want." Pat said as she led the way to the car.

"I guess you don't have to ride on my lap, this time." Mark said regretfully as he got into the back seat, behind his mother.

Enoch's blush was as much of an answer as he was willing to give as, he too, got into the car.

"What was that?" Pat asked curiously.

"Nothing. Just something we did while we were gone." Mark said quickly as he realized that he would need to be more careful about what he said around his mother.

* * * * *

"Hello? This is Derek Taylor, I spoke to you yesterday." Derek said carefully.

"Yes. That's right. Could you please pass a message along to Joe Bob, Jim Bob and Beau? Tell them that we found Mark and that he's fine." Derek said carefully.

After a moment, Derek smiled, then said, "Yes, he's really fine. I promise."

"Thank you." Derek said a moment later, then continued, "We're driving away from the house right now, but as soon as we get back, I'll call you so that the boys can arrange a visit."

"Yes. Thank you, again. Have a good day." Derek said before disconnecting the call.

"Was that Lindie?" Pat guessed.

"Yes. She sounded so excited you would have thought it was one of her own kids that'd been found." Derek said with a smile as he took out his phone.

"What are you doing?" Pat asked curiously.

"Putting Lindie's number into my phone so I can call them back when we're back at the house." Derek answered simply.

"Good idea." Pat said with a nod.

* * * * *

While his parents were talking in the front seat, Mark leaned over to put an arm around Enoch and give him a quick kiss.

"It is improper to do such as this in front of your parents." Enoch said in a mortified whisper.

"They're *our* parents, and if we can't kiss in front of them, then who *can* we kiss in front of?" Mark asked simply.

"It seems disrespectful." Enoch shyly muttered.

"You guys mind if we kiss?" Mark called loudly, so his parents could hear.

"It's okay for now, but not when we get into traffic, you'll cause some old biddy to have an accident." Pat said with a smile.

"Keep it above the waist." Derek said with a devilish grin.

"See? They're okay with it." Mark said warmly, then asked, "Just for a little bit?"

"For a moment." Enoch finally reluctantly agreed.

Chapter 17: Know From Whence You Came

"Such a grand building is beyond my imagining. How does it not collapse in on itself?" Enoch asked in wonder as they walked into the airport.

"I don't really know anything about that. But it *is* pretty impressive, isn't it?" Mark asked as he took a moment to admire the architecture.

"I think that there have been some improvements in building materials over the years." Derek offered as he led them through the main lobby.

"Can I show Enoch around while you do your stuff?" Mark asked hopefully.

"I'll be right over there, at the rental desk. Don't wander too far off. I don't want to have to go looking for you." Derek said seriously.

"I just want to show Enoch the planes and maybe he can get to see one take off." Mark said excitedly.

Derek smiled at the idea and said, "Go ahead. Just check back here in about ten minutes."

* * * * *

"It is beyond anything I could have dreamed." Enoch said in wonder as he looked out the window at all the activity on the tarmac.

"Yeah. There's lots of crazy things that you're going to need to learn about." Mark said honestly.

"I am concerned. How will we explain that I am unaware of such things?" Enoch asked anxiously.

"I don't know. Maybe we can say that you're Amish or something." Mark said thoughtfully.

"I am aware of the Amish people from my time! They still exist?" Enoch asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I guess. I really don't know too much about them except that they live like... well, probably a lot like you're used to." Mark said simply.

"I will not offer it as an explanation, but if pressed, I will keep it in mind." Enoch said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. It's best to let people think what they're going to think. Whenever you try to explain things, you usually end up making them worse." Mark

said frankly, then pointed as he said, "Watch this, it looks like that one is about to take off!"

* * * * *

"I was just about to come looking for you." Derek said as Mark and Enoch approached.

"Were you able to get a car?" Mark asked hopefully.

"Yes. If you two are ready, we can go out to the lot and get it now." Derek said easily.

"Does it have air conditioning?" Mark asked cautiously.

"I double checked. Yes. It does." Derek assured his son.

"Okay. I'm ready, then." Mark said decisively.

* * * * *

Even though the sun was bright and it *was* hot, Mark had to admit that it wasn't as bad as when he'd first arrived.

Enoch looked around the lot of rental cars and seemed to be on the verge of sensory overload.

"All these... automotives... are waiting for someone to hire them?" Enoch finally asked.

"Yeah. This is an airport, so people show up all the time and rent cars so that they can get around while they're here. Then, when it's time for them to go back to where they came from, they drop the car off here and fly back." Mark explained with a smile.

"This is ours." Derek said as he veered off in a different direction.

The boys followed, then waited as Derek unlocked the car.

"It is good that I was able to go riding with you before... this. I might have been overwhelmed if I didn't have some inkling of what was in store." Enoch said as he got into the back seat.

"I didn't think about that. Everything was dark for you, wasn't it?" Mark asked curiously as he turned so that he could talk to Enoch comfortably.

"Yes. Although it didn't seem so at the time. With your cousins in the car, each emitting their own light, I felt 'normal' for the first time in longer than I can remember." Enoch said thoughtfully.

"What was it like, on the other side?" Derek asked curiously as he pulled the car out of the parking space.

"It was dark." Enoch said simply.

Derek puzzled over the vague statement and glanced at his son with question.

"The only light there was spiritual light. So we could see each other, and we could see people when they walked into the room in the real world, but we couldn't see the door or the furniture or anything like that." Mark explained.

"Except for those things which are beloved. They absorb some of the spiritual light of those that cherished them." Enoch added.

"That's hard to imagine." Derek said honestly.

"Without light or dark, heat or cold, it is difficult to perceive the passage of time in that place." Enoch added quietly.

"I'm surprised that you didn't go crazy, being there, like that, for all those years." Mark said honestly.

"I have had much time to consider such things. I believe that from the time I entered that place, that I was unchanging. Not only did I not eat or drink, but I also didn't... grow, within myself. As I was upon entering, so I was when I left." Enoch said carefully.

"I wonder if it's like that for ghosts, too." Mark asked speculatively.

"How do you mean?" Enoch asked curiously.

"You said that the guys who lured you into limbo eventually faded away. If spirits didn't change, then that wouldn't happen." Mark said thoughtfully.

"I hadn't considered that." Enoch slowly admitted.

"Maybe they didn't stop existing, maybe they just moved on to another place, you know, maybe they were pulled from limbo into the realm that they belonged in." Mark said seriously.

"If the light comes to claim the souls of the righteous, then perhaps the dark slowly claims those who have other destinies." Enoch said carefully.

"I guess it doesn't matter. We're alive. We should probably focus on living." Mark said with a smile.

"Yes. I have much to learn. I should begin." Enoch agreed.

* * * * *

"This wasn't here the last time I was in town." Derek said as he pulled into the Wal*Mart parking lot.

"Are you sure you want to do this now? This place is huge." Mark asked his father, to be sure.

"Yes. This seems like the best place for us to go to get everything that Enoch might need." Derek said honestly.

"Not down here, this is the food side. Park over there." Mark said as he pointed.

"While I appreciate your generous nature, I will say once again that you need not spend your money purchasing things for me." Enoch said anxiously.

"Enoch, did you see what I had when I showed up at the house?" Mark asked seriously.

"I recall some luggage and a few boxes of personal belongings." Enoch said cautiously.

"Yeah. It wasn't a ton of stuff. All we're talking about is getting you some stuff of your own." Mark said seriously.

After pulling the car into a parking space, Derek turned to Enoch and said, "Before we go in, I need for you to promise me something."

"What would you like for me to promise?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"We're probably going to be looking at a lot of things in there. What I need for you to promise me is that you'll be honest and tell us if there's something you do or don't like. If you aren't honest and say you like something that you don't, because you're trying to make us happy, then you're going to end up with things that you don't want and won't use." Derek said seriously.

"Yes. I will promise to be honest." Enoch said earnestly.

"Good. Then let's do this." Derek said with a smile, then opened his car door.

* * * * *

The front doors spread open automatically as they approached.

Enoch froze in place and stared in wonder.

"I'll explain it later. Come on." Mark said to him quietly.

It took a moment, but Enoch was finally able to force himself to start walking again.

As they walked into the lobby of the store, Mark smiled at Enoch's awestruck state.

"Is this some sort of a festival?" Enoch asked breathlessly.

"No. It's like this all the time." Mark said warmly, then turned to his father and asked, "What do you want to look at first?"

Derek seemed to be trying to get his bearings as he looked around.

"Dad, you're not from the eighteen hundreds. What are we looking for?" Mark chuckled.

"Clothes, I think." Derek said uncertainly.

"I know where that is." Mark said simply, then walked to the cart corral and took a shopping cart.

* * * * *

"Mark!" Enoch whispered.

"What is it?" Mark asked as he let go of the shirt he was looking at.

"Is it now acceptable for a woman to expose herself in such a manner?" Enoch asked cautiously.

Mark looked down the aisle and spotted what had caught Enoch's attention.

"It's summertime in West Texas. People sometimes wear short cutoffs and midriffs like that to stay cool." Mark said seriously, then added, "If it bothers you, you don't have to look at it."

"I had not considered that attitudes regarding social propriety might have changed so..." Enoch trailed off as his mouth fell open.

Mark followed his gaze and was actually surprised when he saw that the person that Enoch had been watching *wasn't* a woman.

After a moment for the shock to wear off, Mark quietly said, "Welcome to Wal*Mart."

* * * * *

It turned out that buying pants and shirts was the easiest part of their shopping. Enoch's tastes were fairly simple.

The first real obstacle was to convince Enoch that he didn't need a 'union suit'. That took a few minutes.

Then Mark had to walk Enoch through each of the options of briefs, boxers and boxer briefs, then outline the advantages and drawbacks of each. He didn't even bother going near the 'bikini' briefs, since he wouldn't consider wearing those himself.

After that, he got to do the same thing with t-shirts, outlining the benefits of tank top, round neck and v-neck styles. He actually had to call upon his father to help him with that, never having thought too much about it.

Socks were easy.

Shoes weren't.

Enoch actually didn't have much of an opinion. But Mark and Derek went back and forth for a few minutes, talking about the relationship of price versus quality. Finally, Derek reluctantly gave in to his son's insistence that Enoch simply needed something to cover his feet at the moment. When they had the time to do so, they could go to an actual 'shoe' store to get something of quality for Enoch.

* * * * *

As far as Mark was concerned, they were ready to go. They had Enoch outfitted from head to toe. But Derek decided that there was another stop that they needed to make.

Mark couldn't help but smile as Enoch carefully examined all the accessories on offer, such as wallets, belts, tie clips, handkerchiefs and the like.

After that, Derek made sure to show Enoch the manicure sets. Once Enoch had selected the kit that he wanted, Derek made a point of asking Mark if he needed one, too.

Although Mark had nail clippers at home, he didn't have the rest of the tools, so he picked one similar to Enoch's, in a different color carrying case.

Derek asked if either of them needed any shaving supplies.

Mark and Enoch had to shyly admit that neither of them needed anything like that, yet.

* * * * *

Much to Mark's surprise, Derek then took them to the electronics department.

Enoch froze with an expression equal parts wonder and terror when he saw all the large flat screen televisions showing the same program at the same time.

"Are you okay, E?" Mark asked quietly.

"What are these miraculous things?" Enoch asked in a whisper.

"That's a lot to explain." Mark said slowly, then thought about how he could best describe what Enoch was seeing.

Finally, Mark cautiously asked, "Have you ever seen pictures move in a flip book?"

"Yes. Back when I was in Boston, with my aunt, she had a kineograph book that she showed me just before I left for Texas. Before that, she had a zoetrope that I enjoyed many times." Enoch said seriously.

"I don't know what those things are, but I get that you know what I'm talking about." Mark said carefully, then continued, "Well, you know how when you looked at those pictures and flipped through the pages, it looked like they were moving. Televisions do just about the same thing. They show a bunch of pictures on the screen so fast that it seems that you're seeing something that's alive, right outside your window."

"It seems like magic." Enoch said in awe.

Mark smiled, then said, "Remember where we were this morning? *That* was magic. This is just a hundred years of scientists, one after another, figuring out how to improve on what the one before did."

"But how does it work?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Actually, I have no idea. But if you figure it out, maybe you can be the one who comes up with whatever's next." Mark said with a tender smile.

After looking around the department, Derek walked up to the boys and quietly asked, "Do you think you'll be needing anything to keep you entertained on the trip?"

Mark considered for a moment, then said, "I think E's probably going to have enough questions to keep both of us busy."

"I apologize if my ignorance is causing you any inconvenience." Enoch said shyly.

"Dad just asked if we wanted something *else* to do to keep us busy. And I told him 'no'. That's because I *like* answering your questions." Mark said frankly.

"Thank you. But please let me know if you tire of answering my questions and I will refrain." Enoch said seriously.

"You got it, E." Mark said easily.

"Can you guys think of anything else that you're going to need for the trip?" Derek asked cautiously.

Mark looked at the basket, which was nearly full of clothes, then quickly said, "Suitcases."

"Great idea! I think I remember seeing luggage." Derek said and took off before the boys could even consider responding.

Mark and Enoch shared a smile, then hurried to follow.

* * * * *

After paying at the checkout, they went back out to the car and packed their purchases away.

"Mark, do you remember where the LGBT resource center is?" Derek asked as he started the car.

"Not really. I mean, I've been there a couple of times, but I don't remember the street address or anything." Mark said cautiously.

"I think that I can get us there, but I may need your help." Derek said seriously.

"Why do you want to go there?" Mark asked his father quietly.

"Because I talked to them earlier today and told them that you were missing. I just thought that while we're out and about, it might be nice to drop in and let them know that you've been found." Derek said honestly.

"Yeah." Mark quietly mumbled.

"Face it, you've got a lot of people who care about you. That's not a bad thing." Derek told his son with a smile.

"It's just uncomfortable." Mark said honestly.

"Some things are. But if you care about your friends at all, then you want to let them know that you're alright." Derek said seriously.

"Yeah. I know you're right." Mark reluctantly agreed.

* * * * *

"Hey guys! I'm Zyker. Let me know if you need help finding anything." The young man at the cash register said pleasantly as Derek and the boys walked in.

"Actually, I was wanting to talk to Boyce, if he's available." Derek said hopefully.

"He's left for the day. Is it something I can help you with?" Zyker asked hesitantly.

"I had talked to him earlier about my missing son." Derek said frankly, then pointed at Mark before continuing, "I found him."

"Oh! Well, I'm not sure if Boyce and Hugh have left the building, yet. Give me a second and I'll see if they're still in back." Zyker said, then dashed away before Derek could respond.

As they waited, Derek looked back at the boys and found Enoch frozen, wide eyed, looking at a poster of two hunky shirtless men, snuggled together.

"I bet that this is quite a bit for you to take in." Derek said to Enoch gently.

Enoch was barely able to nod as his eyes seemed to be unable to look elsewhere.

"Detective Taylor, what can I do for you?" Boyce asked pleasantly as he walked out of the back room, with Hugh following a step behind.

"I found Mark, so I thought I'd stop by and let you know that he's alright." Derek said with a smile.

"Thank you so much for that. I really appreciate you thinking of us." Boyce said sincerely.

"Since you were so helpful, it only seemed right." Derek said timidly.

"How are you doing, Mark?" Boyce asked gently.

"I'm okay." Mark said simply, then quietly added, "I didn't mean to make people worry."

"I'm just glad that you're safe and sound." Boyce said with a sincere smile.

"Dad, do you mind if I buy a few things while we're here?" Mark asked suddenly.

"Like what?" Derek asked cautiously.

Mark rolled his eyes, then picked up a box of condoms and showed it to his father.

"We'll leave you to your shopping. Have a good day." Boyce said warmly, then walked with Hugh, into the back room.

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"LDS?" Zyker asked when Mark placed his selections by the cash register.

"What's that?" Mark asked cautiously.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought from the way you and your friend were dressed, that you might be from the church." Zyker said quietly.

Mark glanced at Enoch, then realized the assumption that Zyker had made, based on their style of dress.

"No. We're not Mormons. But Enoch was raised kinda like that and isn't comfortable wearing regular clothes, yet. So we're dressed this way to make him comfortable." Mark explained.

Zyker smiled at the statement, then quietly said, "If you need any help with that, I know some people, kind of a support group, who help ex-Mormons get settled into outside life."

"Did you used to be a Mormon?" Mark asked cautiously. It seemed wrong to ask, but since Zyker had introduced the subject, he suspected that he might be open to talking about it.

"Yes. I was raised in a closed community of fundamentalists. I was one of the lucky ones who escaped." Zyker said frankly.

"I think Enoch's going to be okay. But if he's having a problem, I'll be sure to ask for help." Mark assured him.

Zyker smiled at the answer, then started ringing up Mark's purchases.

* * * * *

"Are you guys hungry?" Derek asked as they got back into the car.

"Yeah!" Mark answered immediately.

Enoch seemed to be carefully considering the question and finally quietly said, "Yes, Sir... Father."

"Good. I think I remember how to get there from here." Derek said before pulling out of the parking lot.

* * * * *

Mark looked into the back seat with concern at Enoch's pensive expression.

"Are you alright, E?" Mark asked cautiously.

"Everything is so unfamiliar and... strange. I do not know if I will be able to adapt to this new world of yours." Enoch said quietly.

"Sure you will." Mark said with a smile. "You've just got to give it some time. And I'll be there with you to help you until you get the hang of things."

"It's been less than a day, Enoch. It'll get easier." Derek assured him.

"Did you notice that guy back at the resource center?" Mark asked seriously.

Enoch tentatively nodded.

"His name is Zyker. While I was checking out, he told me that he was raised in a closed fundamentalist Mormon community. When he got away from there, he probably felt just like you do, now. So that means that you're not the only one who's going through something like this." Mark said seriously.

"He's right. Even though other people might not be going through *exactly* the same thing that you are, a lot of people are going through their own things and feeling every bit as out of place as you." Derek assured him.

After a moment to consider, Enoch quietly said, "Thank you. It helps me to know that there are others who are facing similar circumstances."

"They're not just facing them, E. Look at Zyker. He faced it and got past it. Now he's working at the LGBT resource center and helping other people who are just starting to deal with things." Mark implored him to understand.

"Yes. Knowing someone who has been able to overcome and put the past behind him gives me hope." Enoch said with a slight smile.

"We're here." Derek said as he pulled the car to a stop.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, do you know if Greg is here?" Derek asked at the food service counter.

"No. He's already left for the day." The girl behind the counter said simply.

Derek nodded, then looked at the boys and asked, "Do you know what you want?"

"A Big Mac combo." Mark said immediately.

"What about you, Enoch?" Derek asked cautiously.

"I have no idea what these things are." Enoch said honestly.

Derek nodded, then said, "I'll have three Big Mac combos."

The cashier rang up their order, then placed three empty cups on the counter.

Mark grabbed two of them and walked away as Derek paid for their meals.

"Come on." Mark said from a few steps away, encouraging Enoch to follow.

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"Have you ever had sodas before?" Mark asked cautiously.

"Yes, but they were usually prepared by the pharmacist at the drugstore." Enoch said carefully.

"Oh, good. Well this is probably about the same, except that these machines mix it for you. Just pick out the flavor that you want." Mark said simply, then went about filling his own cup.

"May I just have water?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"Sure." Mark said, then started looking around curiously.

Enoch watched and waited.

"There it is! Just go ahead and get your ice, then put your cup under that spout and press that little button, there." Mark said as he pointed.

Although he was a little uncertain as he dispensed ice into his cup, Enoch was able to get the water for himself.

* * * * *

By the time the boys were done filling their drinks, Derek was walking away from the service counter with their food.

Once they had selected a table, Derek went back to get his own drink while Mark divided the food amongst them.

Enoch sat and watched for a moment as Mark opened the box and picked up his Big Mac.

After taking a bite, Mark noticed Enoch watching him.

"It's really good." Mark fought to say past a mouthful of food.

Enoch watched for a moment longer, then did his best to pick up the sandwich without making a mess.

Mark watched and waited for Enoch's reaction.

A look of surprise crossed Enoch's face as the taste registered.

"Do you like it?" Mark asked hopefully.

"It is very good." Enoch said in astonishment.

"Do you guys need any ketchup or napkins?" Derek asked as he placed his drink on the table.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot." Mark said quickly.

Derek turned and left as Mark said, "From the way you're holding that, I guess that you didn't eat many hamburgers, back where you're from."

"Not precisely." Enoch said carefully, then explained, "My aunt would be appalled to see me eat a meal such as this. In her opinion, food was to be eaten off plates, with cutlery. To do otherwise was uncivilized. This is reminiscent of the 'street food' that one could purchase in the city from street vendors or at festivals."

"Is everything alright?" Derek asked as he returned.

"Yeah. Enoch was just saying how this food reminds him of the food they used to sell at festivals." Mark said simply.

"We'll have to see if we can find a festival to visit while we're driving, so you can compare it to what you're used to." Derek said before taking a bite of his hamburger.

"Are we really going to be able to stop on the way back to Michigan?" Mark asked curiously.

"We won't be able to stop in every town and village along the way. But I think that we'll be able to make a few extra stops if we find something interesting." Derek said consideringly.

"This is very good!" Enoch said suddenly.

"What's that, E?" Mark asked curiously.

Enoch pointed to the sleeve of french fries.

"Oh, yeah. They're really good. But you've got to eat them before they get cold. If they get cold, they're nasty." Mark said seriously.

Derek nodded his agreement.

"Where are we going next?" Mark asked curiously.

"I was thinking that we could go back to the house and get Enoch's new clothes washed. I really don't know what your mother has planned, but we might be going over to your grandparents' house, later this evening." Derek said thoughtfully.

"When do you think that we'll be leaving for Michigan?" Mark asked cautiously.

"Again, I don't know what your mother has planned. She was looking into some legal matters, so I don't know what's going to come of that. But I suppose that we could conceivably leave as soon as tomorrow morning." Derek said honestly.

Mark slowly nodded as he thought about his father's words.

"Was there something else that you wanted to do?" Derek asked curiously.

"I was just hoping that we could visit with Joe Bob, Jim Bob and Beau before we left." Mark said quietly.

"I already promised to call them when we knew that we were going to be at the house." Derek said seriously, then added, "Let's see what your mother has going on, then we can call them and see when you'll be able to visit with them." Derek finished with a smile at his son.

"Thanks, Dad." Mark said quietly.

* * * * *

After enjoying their meal, they got back into the car and started the drive back to the house.

"I guess I didn't think to ask, is there anything that you were wanting to do?" Mark asked into the back seat.

When he didn't get an immediate response, he looked at Enoch with concern.

Although Enoch's eyes were closed, he was sitting with his usual perfect posture.

"I think he's asleep." Mark said more quietly to his father.

"I suppose that it's been a long day for him. Combine that with a full belly and a warm car and I suppose that it was bound to happen." Derek said consideringly.

"Should I wake him up?" Mark asked uncertainly.

"No. Let him sleep until we get back to the house." Derek said gently.

"What then? Do you still want to go out to grandpa's house?" Mark asked cautiously.

"We'll still have to see what your mother has planned, but if she doesn't need for us to go anywhere, we could spend the evening washing clothes and packing for our trip." Derek said consideringly.

After a long moment of staring at Enoch, Mark quietly said, "I love him."

"I can tell." Derek said with a smile.

"Do you really think that everything's going to be alright?" Mark asked with concern.

"You're probably going to have all kinds of challenges, getting Enoch up-to-date and feeling like he fits in here." Derek said honestly.

Mark slowly nodded his agreement.

"But that's life. We all have things to face every day, both good and bad. We just have to try to make the best decisions that we can as the situation changes." Derek said frankly.

"I know you're right, but I just feel like Enoch has so much more to face than anyone else." Mark said honestly.

"Mark, during my years with the police department, I've met countless people who feel exactly the same way. Trust me. It happens every single day to people everywhere. Enoch's situation may be unique, but the fact that he has challenges to face isn't." Derek said seriously.

"I guess so." Mark reluctantly admitted.

"But Enoch's going to have us there to help him. He'll get through it, and he'll be stronger after he's faced his challenges and overcome them." Derek added.

"Yeah." Mark agreed, then added, "I just want him to be happy. He deserves to be happy."

"So do you. So do I. So does your mother." Derek said frankly, then continued, "I don't mean to minimize Enoch's situation, but I think it's important for you to realize that what Enoch's facing doesn't set him apart from everyone else. It makes him one of us."

Mark thought about his father's words for a moment, then quietly said, "Thanks, Dad."

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When they arrived back at the house, Mark looked at his father, silently asking what they should do.

"Go ahead and wake him up. Then take him up to your room and lie down with him. If he falls right back to sleep, then you can come downstairs and help me get us ready for the trip." Derek said decisively.

Mark nodded, happy that his father had a plan, since he felt uncertain about what they were doing.

"Wake up, E." Mark said gently.

"Mark? Did I fall asleep?" Enoch asked in confusion.

"Yeah. I guess that you've been awake for a hundred years, so you were overdue for a nap." Mark said with a gentle smile.

"Please forgive me. I didn't mean to..." Enoch began to say, but was interrupted.

"Come on. Get out of the car and let's get you to bed." Mark said with a smile.

"Don't you and your father have a number of things planned for this evening?" Enoch asked as he undid his seat belt.

"Plans change." Mark said with a smile, then quietly added, "All you have to do right now is sleep. We'll take care of everything else in the morning."

Enoch seemed reluctant, but finally said, "If you are certain that we have no other, more pressing commitments."

"Don't worry. Dad's got it all under control. He'll let us know if we need to be doing something." Mark said as he was finally able to get Enoch out of the car and onto his feet.

"If you say that it is so, I will believe you." Enoch said as he walked with Mark toward the house.

* * * * *

"How did things go?" Pat asked as she walked into the kitchen.

"I got the rental car and we went shopping for some clothes for Enoch." Derek said simply.

"What are you cooking?" Pat asked curiously as she walked up beside her ex-husband.

"I just thought I'd make us a nice goulash for dinner." Derek said easily.

"That doesn't look like very much. Are the boys going to be joining us?" Pat asked cautiously.

"I don't think so. The last time I checked on them, they were both fast asleep." Derek said simply.

"Are you sure that taking in this boy is the right thing to do?" Pat asked with concern.

"Yes. That's one of the few things that I *am* certain of." Derek said frankly.

"Where did he come from?" Pat asked as she went to the cupboard to start setting the table.

"Boston, I think." Derek said quietly.

"No. I mean, how did he end up here with Mark?" Pat asked seriously.

"Enoch was in trouble and Mark helped him. That's really all there is to it." Derek said simply as he stirred the pan on the stove, then thought to ask, "How did your errands go?"

"It wasn't as much trouble as I thought. I have some forms for you to sign in front of a notary, then they'll need to be filed. That's really about it." Pat said frankly.

"Good. We can do that tomorrow, before we leave." Derek said thoughtfully.

"I talked to Mom and she wants us to go over to their house tomorrow afternoon. They want to see Mark." Pat said hesitantly.

"Yes. That's probably best. If it's at all possible, we should see if we can arrange for Joe Bob's kids to be there. Mark's been wanting to talk with them." Derek said seriously.

"Is that going to throw your travel plans behind?" Pat asked cautiously.

"No. We can just leave Saturday morning. I'm on family leave time, so I don't have to hurry right back. And since we sold the house, I have a little extra cash to be able to do this right." Derek said frankly.

"I think that I have everything taken care of that I need to. All that's really left for me to do is pack. I suppose that I could leave Saturday morning,

too." Pat said thoughtfully.

"Dinner is served." Derek said with a smile as he moved the pan from the stove to a trivet on the table.

"It looks good. Thank you for thinking of this." Pat said warmly.

"I've got some laundry going right now, but I really don't have much else to do. Could you use some help packing?" Derek asked casually as he waited for Pat to serve herself a portion of the goulash.

"I think I'll probably do the packing for myself, so I'll know where everything is. But I wouldn't mind it if you tagged along to keep me company." Pat finished with a smile.

"I'll do that." Derek said as he served himself.

Chapter 18: Sincerely Yours

{Holy mother of all fucks, what have I done?} Was the thought that came unbidden into Derek's mind as he awoke.

{Oh shit! Oh shit!} Derek internally whispered as he tried to extricate himself from the bed without waking his ex-wife.

The way his heart was beating and the way he had to fight his natural instinct to run away screaming, reminded him of the few occasions when he had had the honor of working directly with the bomb squad.

It wasn't until he was off the bed and out of the room that Derek felt that it might be safe for him to chance a breath.

There was still a very vocal part of him telling him that he should just hop in the rental car and not stop driving until he reached Michigan... or Canada. In fact, he wouldn't be opposed to an extended stay in a South American country if it came to that. He was only a scant few hundred miles away from the Mexican border after all.

Even as his mind raced over the events of the previous night, his body automatically retrieved his luggage from the study and carried it to the bathroom, so that he could prepare for the day.

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Although the shower seemed to have magical rejuvenation properties, it still couldn't absolve Derek of the horrible, unforgivable mistake that he had made.

{Oh my God! What if she gets pregnant?} Derek silently asked his reflection in the mirror.

Due to the fortuitous timing of his question, he was actually able to see it when all the blood rushed out of his face.

During their marriage, Pat had always taken care of the birth control. It wasn't something that he was in the habit of worrying about.

Since the divorce Derek hadn't pursued any other relationships, and to his knowledge, there hadn't been a need for Pat to take preventative measures either. In the heat of the moment the previous night it had simply not occurred to him that such a thing might end up being a concern.

{Just how many miles *is* it to Mexico from here?} Derek asked himself, then abruptly wondered, {Isn't she about due for the Menopause?}

The next thing Derek knew, he found himself in the kitchen, making breakfast for his family.

Even though his mind was skittering around like an excited puppy on a linoleum floor, Derek somehow managed to stage the ingredients that he would need to make a decent meal.

* * * * *

"It never happened." Pat said gruffly as she walked across the kitchen and directly to the coffee maker.

"Agreed." Derek said as he maintained his focus on the strips of bacon he was laying out on a baking sheet.

"Do you want me to go up and wake the boys?" Pat asked before taking a sip of coffee.

"I'm pretty sure that they'll be down as soon as Mark smells the bacon cooking. That boy must be part bloodhound." Derek finished with a smile.

"How do you think you'll be able to manage with two teenage boys and a full-time job that demands all your time and attention?" Pat asked curiously.

"I'm hoping to prove that I'm able to learn from my mistakes and strike a balance between work and home." Derek said frankly, then slid the pan of bacon into the oven.

"If you find out that you can't manage it, be sure to call me. We'll work something out." Pat said seriously.

"I was thinking, if it comes down to it, that I could take the boys to see my parents... and if that goes well, maybe leave them there to visit for a week or so while I work on getting things resolved for the longer term. I could present it to them as a 'summer vacation' sort of a thing." Derek tentatively suggested.

"I can't see that going well." Pat said honestly.

"It's possible that the colonel has mellowed in the past few years. You know, absence makes the heart grow fonder and all of that." Derek weakly offered.

"Possible, but not likely." Pat said as she fought to maintain a straight face at the ludicrous suggestion.

"It's been about six years since the last time I talked to them. It's probably time..." Derek trailed off as he warred within himself.

"We're divorced now, so I don't have any reason to pretend." Pat said in prelude, then continued, "Your parents are horrible, toxic people with not one single redeeming quality between them. I think that Mark will be better off without their poison spreading through his life."

"It *did* occur to me that they might treat Mark badly because he's gay." Derek quietly admitted.

"They'll probably use his sexual preference as an avenue of attack, but if it's not that, it'll be something else. And I don't even want to think about what they'll come up with to hurt Enoch. He seems so vulnerable and those people are absolute monsters. They strike me as the type who likes for their prey to suffer." Pat said firmly.

"I had a feeling that my parents weren't your favorite people but I had no idea that you disliked them that much." Derek said quietly as he took the bacon pan out of the oven and began turning the strips of bacon.

"They're horrible, awful people who bring pain and misery to everyone they meet. If you have *any* evidence to the contrary, I'd love to hear about it." Pat finished earnestly.

"Well, at least with the colonel, you always know where you stand. Everything is done exactly according to specifications and to the letter of the law." Derek hesitantly offered.

"But your mom leads him around by the short hairs. That throws a wrench into the whole dependability thing. One word from her and whatever he was planning gets dropped like a hot potato." Pat countered.

"You know what? Let's just accept that it's a really bad idea and agree to never, ever, under any circumstances, allow the boys to have any contact with them." Derek said seriously.

"Can I have that in writing?" Pat asked humorlessly.

"How do you mean?" Derek asked curiously as he placed a skillet on the stove and started the burner.

"Like in a living will or something to let people know your wishes regarding the boys should something happen to you." Pat said frankly.

"I'll have it to you as soon as I've gotten Enoch's legal documents settled." Derek promised.

"How big of a problem do you see that being?"

"I may have to tread into some gray areas to make it all work, but I'm reasonably sure that once we're back in Michigan I'll know who to go to to get his things in order."

"Is breakfast almost ready?" Mark asked sleepily as he padded into the kitchen.

Derek glanced back over his shoulder and smiled at the sight of Mark and Enoch both looking sleep ruffled and completely relaxed.

"It will be in a minute. Why don't you get yourselves some juice and have a seat while I finish it up?" Derek asked as he turned the majority of his attention to the skillet in front of him.

"Go ahead and sit down, E. I'll get it." Mark said as he started toward the refrigerator.

Derek glanced in Enoch's direction in time to see the lost and uncertain expression that he was wearing.

"Enoch? Do you have any favorite breakfast foods that you enjoy?" Derek asked pleasantly.

"There's no need to trouble yourself on my behalf." Enoch timidly responded.

"I wasn't planning on it. But if there's something that you especially like or something that you feel like you're missing, we might pick it up next time we go shopping and have it some other morning." Derek easily explained.

"Before I left Boston, I was served a variety of foods that I enjoyed very much. Since arriving in Texas, I have learned to be thankful for each and every morsel given me." Enoch said quietly.

"Translation: He'll eat anything." Mark said as he placed glasses of juice on the table.

"I wasn't worried about that. He's a teenage boy, after all." Derek said to his son, then turned to Enoch and continued, "But what I wanted to know was if you have a favorite breakfast food that you particularly enjoy."

"One thing that I always liked were the jams and jellies that my aunt would set out at breakfast. Just a dab would turn a plain crust of bread into a

delightful confection." Enoch said with a wistful smile at the memory.

"I got it." Pat said before Derek could even open his mouth.

He smiled in her direction and said a quick, "Thanks."

"You get a choice between strawberry and grape." Pat said toward the table as she opened the refrigerator.

"I didn't mean for you to go to any trouble." Enoch hurried to explain.

"I carried it from there to here. I'd hardly call that trouble." Pat said as she placed the jelly jars on the table, near to where Enoch was sitting.

"Watch out! Coming through!" Derek said as he carried three plates of food simultaneously.

"I would help you if you asked." Pat said as she stood aside.

"I know. Don't worry. I've got this." Derek said as he placed a full plate at her place setting.

"Thank you." Pat said sincerely as she slid into her chair.

Derek hurried back to the stove to grab a plate for himself.

"This is so good. I feel that it must be a dream." Enoch said distantly.

"Nope. It's real. I promise." Derek said as he took his seat.

"It really is good. You should've cooked breakfast for us before..." Mark trailed off, immediately regretting his words.

"...the divorce?" Derek guessed.

"Yeah. Sorry." Mark quietly acknowledged.

"You don't have anything to be sorry about." Derek said frankly.

"You and Mom aren't together anymore. I think that's a big reason to be sorry." Mark said firmly.

"If you'll stop and think about it, we haven't been together for a very long time. We just hadn't gone to the time and trouble to make it official until recently." Pat told her son seriously.

"We had the same mailing address. Otherwise we led separate lives." Derek added somberly.

"I know we haven't done anything as a family since, well... ever, but there was always the chance that we could. Now with you being divorced, that kind of kills the *hope* that we ever will." Mark said imploringly.

"What were you hoping that we could do?" Pat asked slowly.

"I don't know. I guess I always thought that someday we'd be like the TV families and just... I don't know, do stuff... be a family." Mark said helplessly, obviously frustrated by his inability to articulate his expectations.

"You mean like us sitting down to breakfast together and having a meaningful discussion?" Derek asked curiously.

Mark looked at his father with surprise for a moment, then timidly answered, "Um, yeah. Like that."

"I'm sure that you already know this, but I still feel that it needs to be said." Pat said in prelude, then continued, "Those TV families aren't real. If they ever have a problem, it'll be solved within half an hour. Nothing any of them ever does has consequences and not one of them has to worry about the most common problems that normal people face every single day."

"That's right. They never have to worry about putting food on the table or gas in the tank." Derek confirmed.

"Especially if it's a choice of one or the other." Pat quietly added.

"Those shows are an escape from real world problems. And while they might be a fun diversion from time to time, they're certainly not a guide on how to live your life." Derek firmly added.

"Please excuse my interruption, but are you assuming that I understand what you are talking about?" Enoch asked carefully.

Before anyone else could answer, Derek quickly explained, "Some people make the mistake of thinking that certain morality plays hold more meaning than they actually do."

"So rather than recognizing the moral, they believe that all the elements of the story, even those obviously exaggerated to make a point, constitute a primer on life and the greater world?" Enoch asked slowly and uncertainly.

"Yes. That's right." Derek said simply.

"I think it may also have something to do with how drastically society has changed from one generation to the next." Pat said thoughtfully.

"How so?" Derek asked with interest.

"It used to be that if a person had a question about what was the proper course of action to take, they could look at their extended family or

neighbors and see various examples of what was acceptable.

"For some, the decay of community has caused media to fill the void with 'morality plays' that were never intended to fill that role. As you explained, people end up assigning more importance and meaning than is actually there. On the surface, it *appears* to be happy people living happy lives, but if you bother to look beneath the props and scenery, you'll see the fiction for what it is.

"Another way of looking at it is that while growing up in 'TV Land' might *sound* nice, it also means that you're running a race not only without a path to guide you, but also without benchmarks to tell you that you've accomplished what you were supposed to at any particular stage of things. It's a pointless, directionless way of life. It's all for show and nothing important ever really happens." Pat said seriously.

"Oh yeah, right. Now I remember why we don't sit down together as a family." Mark said with a grin at his mother.

"As I recall, once you get entrenched in a conversation, you're not exactly a ray of sunshine either, Puddin." Pat countered and ended with a teasing little smirk for her son.

"Regardless, we would do well to take this opportunity to discuss what we're going to be doing today, so that we're all on the same page." Derek interjected into the conversation.

"Before much of anything else, you and I need to go into town and sign a few things in front of a notary. Everything else is arranged, we just have to go do it." Pat said seriously.

"Agreed. I suppose that while we're doing that, the boys can be packing for the trip to Michigan. The way things are looking, they might not get a better chance." Derek suggested.

"I *just* finished unpacking." Mark complained.

"At least you haven't had a chance to acquire a lot of new things to weigh you down." Derek said as optimistically as possible.

"And that's a *good* thing?" Mark asked cautiously.

"*Anyway...*" Derek said loudly to draw all attention back to himself, "As I see it, the next thing on our itinerary will probably be when Pat and I get back to the house. As soon as your grandparents hear that we're leaving, I'm

sure that they'll invite us over. So most likely, just as soon as we get back, we'll load everyone up and go to Harlan's place for a big lunch with your grandparents so that everyone can have a chance to say goodbye." Derek said seriously.

Everyone around the table was silent, not wanting to think about leaving their friends and family behind.

"And, unless something comes up to make us alter our plans, all of us will be needing to head out tomorrow, first thing in the morning. That being the case, we're probably going to need to pack the cars as much as we can tonight." Derek said none too enthusiastically.

"I still haven't completely rested up from the trip here." Mark whined.

"I suppose Enoch and I could go on ahead to Michigan and later on, when you're feeling sufficiently rested..." Derek trailed off with a grin at his son.

"No. That's okay. I was just saying..." Mark trailed off with a shrug.

"Good. Then it sounds like we have a plan." Derek said as he turned his attention back to his briefly forgotten breakfast.

* * * * *

"Whatever you rescued Enoch from must have been really horrendous for him to be so out of touch with everything." Pat said as she kept the majority of her attention on her driving.

"While I have no doubt that he's been traumatized, he's also been kept very isolated. I'm sure that's a contributing factor." Derek confirmed.

"And Mark rescued him?" Pat cautiously asked.

"If you want to think of it that way." Derek finished with a smile.

"You know, you're really infuriating when you're being evasive." Pat complained.

"Yeah. I know." Derek said repentantly.

"But you're still not going to tell me what's *really* going on?" Pat asked plaintively.

"Nope."

"But whatever it is isn't going to come back to hurt Mark, is it?"

"Let me put it this way, if we do nothing and say nothing about the whole matter, then it will most likely just blow over." Derek carefully explained.

"I don't think that I'm going to be able to let it go. I trust your motives and your judgement, but you're asking me to take too much on faith." Pat complained.

"Try thinking of it this way. It's like a while back, Enoch fell into a hole. He was stuck there for a very long time. Eventually, Mark unwittingly fell into the same hole. When I went looking for Mark, I found them both. The only way I could get them to safety was to promise that I wouldn't tell where they had been or what had happened to them." Derek said, very precisely.

"Who did you promise?"

"I can't tell you that."

"If this is someone who abducts children, then you have a duty to see that they're brought to justice. It's the only way to *really* protect Mark and Enoch in the long term." Pat said firmly.

"I know what it sounds like, but I promise you that it's not that way at all. This is something else entirely. I just can't tell you exactly what it is because it would put *all* of us in danger."

"Are you implying that the boys might be physically harmed in retaliation if you tell me?"

"No. I'm saying that they would kill us all without hesitation to keep their secrets safe. The only reason that the boys and I were allowed to live was due to one person's compassion. It would be best for all of us if that person didn't have cause to regret helping us." Derek said seriously.

"You're not exaggerating about the severity of this, are you?" Pat asked cautiously.

"Let me put it this way, from my reading of the situation, it appears to me that the person who helped us might face severe consequences if we were found out. However, I suspect that he would face no consequences whatsoever if all four of us were to suddenly become dead, for whatever reason." Derek said in a measured tone.

"So, in essence you're saying that we're alive right now thanks to this person's good graces." Pat said cautiously.

"In so many words, yes." Derek confirmed.

"What am I supposed to tell my family about Enoch?" Pat asked seriously.

"As little as possible, I suppose." Derek said weakly.

"Have you *met* my family? I mean, Mom and Dad will probably be willing to give us the benefit of the doubt, but Prissy won't think twice about asking the most inconvenient and inappropriate questions."

"Maybe we can try to get across to her that we're facing some troubling things and could really use her support at this difficult time in our lives." Derek said thoughtfully.

"This is Prissy we're talking about." Pat reminded him.

"Right. Then maybe we could bring something sparkly to catch her attention." Derek said with a wilting look.

"Actually, that could work. I'll see what I can come up with." Pat said simply, then continued, "If you figure that today is Saturday and we're going to be having an impromptu family gathering to say goodbye to everyone, I have no doubt that Mom and Dad will invite Prissy and Jim Bob and maybe even Petey, if they have a way of getting in touch with him."

"Are you *sure* we have to do this? I mean, Prissy and Petey at the same time? What did we ever do that was bad enough to deserve that?" Derek whined.

"Now I see where Mark gets it." Pat said with a smirk.

"Wait. Gets what?" Derek asked in offense.

"Never mind." Pat said as she dutifully kept her full attention on the road in front of her.

After a moment to consider whether it was worth pursuing, Derek finally said, "Well, at least if Joe Bob is there I'll have someone to talk to."

"It's late enough, I need to call Mom and let her know what's going on. I called last night and told her that Mark had been found, but I didn't have any details for her." Pat said anxiously.

"Would you like for me to call her? I know that you don't like to talk on the phone while you're driving." Derek asked cautiously.

"Would you? I'd really rather not have to pull over." Pat answered honestly.

* * * * *

After getting out his phone and confirming the number, Derek finally said, "Hello?"

"Yes? *Who's that then?*" A woman's voice asked.

"This is Derek, Pat's husband... er, ex-husband. Pat's driving right now and wanted for me to call you to let you know what's going on."

"She said that you found Mark. Is he alright?"

"Yes, he's fine. In fact, in the midst of everything else, he seems to have made a new friend. So he probably counts himself as being better off than he was before." Derek said carefully.

"When you say friend, I take it you mean the type of friend who wouldn't be opposed to handholding and a walk on the beach." Pat's mother said knowingly.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Derek said with a smile. She was sharp. He'd give her that.

"Well good. He's of an age where it's time for him to start thinking about settling down."

"Hattie, he's fourteen." Derek reminded her.

"And this is West Texas. What's your point?" Hattie firmly retorted.

"Pat wanted me to let you know that in light of recent developments our plans seem to have changed."

"How so?"

"Pat's going to continue on to New Mexico to start her new job and get set up, just like she'd been planning. But instead of Mark going with her, he's going to come back to Michigan with me. Since I'm already established in my job, it will probably be easier for me to make arrangements to be there when he needs me." Derek carefully explained.

"How is Mark going to handle leaving his new friend behind?"

"Enoch will be coming with us." Derek said cautiously.

"Isn't this boy's family going to have a problem with that?"

"He doesn't have any family, Hattie. He was on his own and completely alone when Mark found him."

"Well, with all your criminal justice degrees and such, I'll trust that you know what you're doing." Hattie said slowly.

"Most of the time when I see something wrong, there isn't much I can do to set it right. I can do this. It's the right thing." Derek said with certainty.

"Have you decided when you're going to be leaving?"

"We'll be leaving first thing in the morning. I'll be driving to Michigan with the boys and Pat will be driving to New Mexico to get things in order before she has to report for work on Monday." Derek said seriously.

"Will you be able to stop by and visit with us so that we can have a chance to say goodbye to our grandson?"

"Of course. Pat and I have some legal paperwork to sign and get filed right now, but we should be done around noon."

"Well, it's short notice, but with it being Saturday most of the family should be free."

"Please don't go to any trouble..."

"I'll go to as much trouble as I please. You're taking my grandson away, so you don't get to ask me any favors." Hattie said sternly.

"Understood." Derek immediately responded.

"Good. Then I'd best get after it. Tell Patsy to drive safely. Y'all make sure you bring your appetites."

"Will do." Derek confirmed.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

"What did she say?" Pat asked curiously.

"She seemed to think that Mark was the male equivalent of a spinster because he's fourteen and not married yet." Derek said dubiously.

"Yeah. Dad said something like that when we arrived. I guess West Texas has its own culture." Pat said with a smile.

"I'm glad I'm taking Mark back to Michigan then." Derek said frankly.

"Don't you think that there will be those who will look upon Mark and Enoch's relationship as being something 'sinful'?" Pat asked curiously.

"Yes. Probably. But I doubt that it will be any more or less severe than what they would encounter here." Derek said honestly.

"Texans tend to be more open-minded than you think." Pat informed him.

"Like Prissy and Petey?" Derek asked with a look askance at his ex-wife.

"Well, they don't count. They're assholes." Pat said frankly.

"And there are assholes in Michigan too. That's all I'm saying."

"Point taken." Pat finally relented.

"How much farther?" Derek asked as he looked around to see where they were.

"Twenty minutes or so."

"I forgot how spread out it was here. It seems to go on forever."

"We tend to build out instead of up." Pat agreed.

"I know you probably don't believe this, but I really *am* sorry that Mark and Enoch won't be able to stay here."

"Actually, I think I understand."

"Really? Then I wish you'd explain it to me." Derek said with a chuckle.

"The only reason to want to stay here is the people. I'm not just talking about my family, but the people in general. They're good and decent and hard-working. They make putting up with the depressed economy and hellish climate almost worth it." Pat said frankly.

"I can't argue with you about that. If there were any sort of job opportunities here I'd at least consider it, but there really aren't." Derek said regretfully.

"Did you check into it?" Pat asked curiously.

"Whenever I come across industry statistics I make a point of looking at prospective law enforcement opportunities in the Permian Basin. To say it's 'bleak' would be an understatement."

"I have no problem believing that. In fact, that's part of why I cast the net so wide when I started job hunting. I got the feeling that if I only searched locally, that I'd be looking for years." Pat said seriously.

"I'm really happy for you, Pat. I hope that things will work out for you to get everything that you wanted and for all your dreams to come true." Derek said sincerely.

"If you'd been in my corner like this all along, we wouldn't have needed to get divorced."

"Yes we would. Even though I've always been there for you, however you needed me, I've never inspired you to do your best. Just look at what you've

been able to accomplish in only a few weeks away from me. It's obvious that I've been holding you back."

"Maybe I just got too comfortable letting you deal with things. This is the first time that I've stood on my own since... I guess I never really stood on my own before. I went from my parents' house to ours. The closest I ever came to being on my own was in college, and that was all either paid for by my parents or with student loans." Pat said thoughtfully.

"Regardless of how or why things were the way they were, the way things are now is what is important. Right now, you've got a new job that will allow you to use your business degree, you've got a little nest egg so that you won't have to struggle so badly while you're starting out and you've got the freedom to design your new life to be everything you want it to be." Derek said passionately.

Pat thought about his words for a moment, then slowly began to nod her agreement.

"The boys and I will be fine for a while on our own and when you've got things set up to your satisfaction, we can make arrangements for the boys to go to Santa Fe for a visit or possibly even to live there. We'll just have to wait and see how things play out before making any firm decisions." Derek said carefully.

"I would like to think that the boys would want to come and live with me, but I can't really make myself believe that they will." Pat said honestly.

"None of us can predict what will happen that far in the future. As optimistic as I want to be, I can't help but think back on some of the things I've seen at work. Trust me when I say that all it takes is one little misunderstanding or error in judgement to drive a wedge between people and cause a rift that can never be healed. By the time you've got everything settled, the boys may be desperate to be away from me." Derek said frankly.

"Or you may want to be away from them." Pat suggested.

"I very seriously doubt that, but I suppose that anything's possible." Derek reluctantly agreed.

"We're going to park up here on the left, then we'll have to walk around the block to get to the office we need. I'm glad we're doing this on the weekend so I don't have to fight for parking." Pat said as she made a left turn.

"I'm glad we're doing this in the morning. I haven't had time to adjust to the hotter climate." Derek said honestly.

"I grew up in it, but my time living in Michigan has made me soft. I can't even walk barefoot in the heat of the day anymore." Pat chuckled as she pulled the car to a stop.

"Well, if the boys end up moving in with you at some point, make sure you give them time to acclimate." Derek cautioned, then followed Pat's example when she got out of the car.

"After seeing how Mark reacted to arriving here, I don't have any doubt that he'll be fine if he has to face some new challenges. He's made me very proud." Pat said seriously as she led the way down the sidewalk.

"He's made me proud too." Derek quietly agreed.

"You mean in regard to that stuff you can't tell me about?" Pat asked cautiously.

"Yes. And I still can't talk about that, but I can say that he behaved admirably and that I'm very proud of him." Derek said sincerely.

"Then let's get this done so we can get back to the house." Pat suggested as she increased her pace.

Derek followed along, silently agreeing with her plan.

* * * * *

By the time Derek and Pat pulled up in front of the house they had run out of conversation.

Although neither of them brought up the subject of what had transpired the night before, the spectre of it nonetheless hung between them.

"Do you think they're asleep?" Pat asked cautiously.

"I think it's more likely that they're enjoying a special and private moment that they wouldn't want us walking in on." Derek quietly responded, then shouted upward, "Boys! We're home!"

After a long silent moment, a voice from upstairs timidly responded, "We'll be down in just a minute!"

"We'll be leaving for your grandfather's in about twenty minutes. Finish up whatever you're doing and be ready to go!" Derek called upward.

There was another long hesitation before Mark finally responded, "Okay."

"Finish up?" Pat asked in a chuckle.

"It's my hope that our son will grow up to have a healthy and fulfilling sex life. So, to that end, I'm doing my best to be respectful of his relationship with Enoch." Derek explained.

"So you're okay with them having sex? Aren't they a little young?" Pat asked cautiously.

"I don't know about that, but I've seen for myself that he's responsible and understands the practical dangers." Derek said seriously.

"How is that?"

"That's not for me to say. But Mark has gained my trust, so the best thing for me to do right now is to allow him the freedom to prove me right." Derek said honestly.

"I'm used to trying to preempt him from making mistakes and here you are intentionally setting the stage for him to misbehave."

"If he's never given the opportunity to face and overcome temptation, how can we expect him to make the right choices when he's entirely on his own?"

"So you're planning on providing him a safety net?"

"Yes. If it comes to that. But I'm hoping that he'll make good decisions and won't have to make use of the safety net at all. I think that this will be a much more valuable lesson for the boys if they decide things for themselves." Derek said frankly.

"Well, I guess instead of standing around talking, I should probably be packing for the trip tomorrow."

"Would you like some help?" Derek cautiously asked.

"No thank you. I fell for that one last night." Pat said with a smirk.

"I thought you said that it never happened." Derek said with a teasing smile at her.

"Regardless, it won't happen again." Pat said firmly.

"Got it. I'll just go gather my things, then check in on the boys." Derek said quietly.

"You do that." Pat said before starting upstairs.

Derek shook his head as he mounted the stairs, much more slowly than his ex-wife.

Chapter 19: Albeit Regret

"Can I come in?" Derek asked cautiously, doing his best not to interrupt an intimate moment between the boys.

"Sure Dad, the more the merrier." Mark said easily, then hurried to ask, "Do you think we'd have enough time for me to do a quick load of laundry?"

"Did you find the clothes that I washed for you last night?" Derek asked from the doorway.

"Yes, and thanks for doing that, but those are our everyday clothes. If we have the time, I'd like to go ahead and wash some of our nice clothes so that we can wear them out to Grandpa's today."

"I guess you have time. Your mom didn't seem to be in any particular hurry." Derek answered uncertainly as he walked fully into the bedroom and saw that Mark and Enoch were in the process of freeing the new clothing from tags and packaging.

"E, why don't you start packing the clothes that we won't be needing today while I get a load of washing started?" Mark asked quickly.

"Yes. I will do so." Enoch said softly, sounding to Derek to be a bit overwhelmed.

Derek watched as his son rushed out of the room with his arms loaded with clothing.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Enoch?" Derek asked gently.

"I don't know what to do or how to behave." Enoch admitted helplessly.

"I know you probably won't believe this, but that's actually not uncommon for someone your age." Derek said as he pulled out the desk chair and sat down.

A dubious glance was Enoch's entire response.

"As you grow older you'll go from one unfamiliar situation to the next. And in the end, you'll have to be an adult, responsible for yourself. It's natural for a person to come to the realization that what worked perfectly well the

previous day isn't appropriate anymore and feel that they're in danger of floundering." Derek said reasonably.

"So even though my situation is unique, the fact that I'm feeling this way isn't?" Enoch asked uncertainly.

"That's right. This is what people your age often feel like." Derek said happily at Enoch's evident comprehension.

"Mark doesn't appear to feel this way." Enoch cautiously observed.

"Maybe not right now, but every now and then I'm sure that he has his moments. In fact, I'd be worried about him if he didn't. It might mean that he's not growing and developing into the person that he should someday become." Derek said confidently, then thought to add, "Hopefully, between us, we'll be able to help him navigate his way through the worst of the uncertain times before they can take too much of a toll on him."

"I've seen his darkness. I *know* that I can help him past it." Enoch quietly confirmed.

"Good. But remember that if you run out of things to try with him, that I'm always here to help both of you." Derek said gently.

"Yes, but please be aware that my own father was a driven man, who was not especially personable. If I appear to be reluctant to request or accept your aid at some point, know that it is not due to my feelings toward you, but rather, my residual feelings toward him." Enoch cautiously admitted.

"Just do your best and I'll do mine. Between us, we'll make sure that it's enough." Derek said as he stood and gave Enoch the gentlest of hugs.

"Dad, that's my boyfriend. Get your own." Mark said playfully as he entered the bedroom.

"Didn't we ever get around to teaching you about sharing?" Derek asked his son with a grin.

"Nope. Only child. Mine, mine, mine." Mark said as he walked up to his father and Enoch with open arms.

Derek released Enoch and smiled as he fell into Mark's embrace. He noted that the two of them together appeared to be complete.

* * * * *

After a long moment of hugging, Mark thought to ask, "Are we going to be riding over to Grandpa's with Mom? Because if we are, we could go ahead and start packing the rental car now."

"No. I think we'll probably be taking both cars. That way if someone wants to leave early or stay late to visit, we won't be as limited by transportation." Derek said frankly.

After a moment to consider, Mark slowly said, "Yeah. That sounds like a good idea."

"All my stuff is packed, so is there anything I can do to help you two?" Derek asked pleasantly.

"Yeah. We don't have a lot of stuff, but some of it is breakable and needs to be packed better." Mark said frankly as he began to carefully empty the contents of his backpack onto the bed, piece by piece.

"The soldier figures were hand carved and might need a little extra care." Enoch said timidly.

"Those are beautiful. I'd be interested in having them appraised by an expert in the period." Derek said as he picked up one of the soldiers to look at it more closely.

"We're not going to sell them." Mark told his father firmly.

"Of course not. But I'd like to get a sense of how much they're worth and if they have any historic significance that we need to be aware of. We might need to keep them in a display case or even loan them to a museum to be sure that they're properly protected."

"I like the idea of them being on display in a museum." Enoch said with a smile.

"We'll look into it when we get to Michigan." Derek said decisively.

"No matter what, we'll make sure that they end up where people can look at them and appreciate them." Mark quietly promised.

"So it doesn't bother you that they were made for me by... him?" Enoch asked cautiously.

"No. He could make wooden dolls and I can do everything else that you could ever want a boyfriend to do for you. It works out." Mark said

confidently.

"Him who?" Derek asked cautiously.

"My great great grand something or other, Mark James. He's kind of Enoch's ex." Mark explained.

"We were never in a relationship... not really. We were both at a time in our lives when we were lonely and searching for love. We ended up finding each other instead." Enoch fought to explain, despite his blushing.

"That was a long time ago and I'm not worried that you miss him or something." Mark said warmly.

"I *did* miss him, but by the time I disappeared from the world, I had abandoned the majority of my feelings of affection toward him... mostly when I realized that he had none toward me." Enoch carefully explained.

"But didn't he make the soldiers for you because he loved you?" Mark asked curiously.

"He made the soldiers. That much I can say with certainty. I can't say if he made them for me or if he simply had nothing better to do with his time and enjoyed woodcarving. I was so desperate for affection that I may have assigned more meaning than was there." Enoch said introspectively.

"That's easy to do." Derek said simply.

Enoch smiled at him gratefully, then continued, "Whenever he would give me a new soldier, I would examine it in great detail and point out everything that I appreciated about it. I think that's what Mark James loved, not me, but the lengths I would go to to satisfy his ravenous ego."

"I know that you love them. It shows in the light they emit." Mark said simply.

"Perhaps. For over a century I believed that they were an expression of love. Now I realize that they were more of a bribe, a way for Mark James to lure someone into spending time with him and treat him as though he were a decent, or even a mildly interesting person."

"Do you think that he was trying to buy your love?" Derek asked curiously.

"At that time, being isolated and uncertain, I took his overtures as affection. I responded by adoring him and trying to be whatever he wanted me to be.

It seemed to work for a time, but in the end, he must have wanted something else, so he left in search of it."

"What a dickweed." Mark said sourly.

Enoch looked at him with puzzlement for a moment, but then smiled as he caught the gist of what Mark was saying. "While his leaving may not have been the most honorable way of dealing with the situation, he *did* disrupt the pattern that we had become trapped in. For that I can be grateful." Enoch explained.

"So you're saying that you think he did the right thing?" Derek asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Enoch finally responded, "Ultimately, yes. Although I would have preferred it if he had done so a bit more compassionately."

"How are you guys doing?" Pat asked quickly from the bedroom doorway.

"Right now, we're packing some breakables." Derek said simply.

"Do you think we should leave right away or do we have time to haul some things downstairs?" Pat asked seriously.

"Mark's got a load of laundry going, so I think you should have time to do as much packing and hauling as you want." Derek said simply.

"One load?" Pat asked cautiously.

"Whites." Mark automatically responded.

Pat seemed to consider for a moment, then said, "That should work out fine."

"Just call us when you're ready to carry stuff down." Derek said pleasantly.

"Don't worry, I will." Pat assured him before hurrying away.

"I guess we'd better get serious about the packing or Mom's going to be moved before we even get our first box loaded." Mark said warily.

"Pat and I always seemed to function in two different time zones. I used to think of us as being two pieces of a puzzle, and maybe we are, just not pieces that match up." Derek said introspectively.

"You need someone to support you and she needs someone to support her. You couldn't be that for each other, at least not without lots of hurt feelings. When you figured that out, you split the sheets. You did the right thing." Mark assured his father.

"Thanks Mark, I think I needed to hear that... especially from you."

"No problem." Mark said happily, then continued more seriously, "The clothes we're going to be wearing are in the washer, so if we want, we can use the spare clothes as packing to wrap and cushion things."

* * * * *

"Let's go! Mom's expecting us!" Pat called from the foot of the stairs.

"The boys will be down in a minute. They're getting dressed." Derek said as he started down.

"Did you get everything packed up?" Pat asked curiously.

"Yes. We just paced ourselves since we were going to have to wait for the laundry to finish anyway. That allowed us to take our time and do it right." Derek said as he reached the bottom of the staircase.

"Do you think it would be wrong of me to offer Joe Bob and his family the food that I bought? I really don't see the sense of carrying it cross country and they could probably use it." Pat asked seriously.

"I think that if you could ask him in a way that sounds like he's doing you a favor that he might consider it. Maybe you could ask if he'd 'take it off your hands' so it won't go to waste?" Derek suggested with a smile.

"I can't even imagine how Joe Bob and Lindie manage things with so many kids." Pat said honestly.

"I don't know, but whatever they're doing, they need to keep on doing it. From what I've seen, their kids are well mannered, responsible and mature beyond their years."

"I haven't spent much time with them, but Mark certainly seems to have taken to them. I think he's really going to miss them when we leave." Pat said regretfully.

"It'll just make it that much better when we come back for a visit." Derek assured her.

"I suppose it will." Pat admitted, then thought to add, "Since I'll be living relatively close by, I might be able to stop by now and then to check in with them."

After a moment to consider, Derek cautiously responded, "Close by... if you're flying."

"After living in Michigan, living in New Mexico will feel like it's just around the corner." Pat chuckled.

"I don't know how many hours it would take to drive it, but I doubt that it would give you much time to visit before you'd have to drive back." Derek said frankly.

"True enough. I guess I'll just have to save a little money out of each paycheck so that I'll have a travel fund when I need it."

"If you end up needing to go home before your travel fund can be built up, just remember that you can call me. I won't mind helping." Derek said frankly.

"Thanks, I appreciate that." Pat said sincerely.

* * * * *

"Just look at the two of you. Aren't you handsome?" Pat gushed as she watched Mark and Enoch descend the stairs.

Their waistcoats weren't identical but they were of a comparable style and historic period. The nice crisp white button down shirts served to add not only an air of formality, but elegance to their overall appearance.

"Now I see what you mean about him growing up." Derek said frankly.

"New clothes help." Mark said in his defense.

"I think we're underdressed." Pat said with a chuckle.

"It's a good thing that West Texans are so forgiving then." Derek said simply.

"Hold still. I need to get a picture of this." Pat said as she dashed away.

Mark spared his father a withering look.

"Let your mother have a precious memory that she can hold on to in the dark times." Derek said imploringly.

Mark's expression softened as he nodded his agreement.

As Pat returned, Derek stepped out of the way to give her a clear shot of the boys, standing in front of the staircase.

After a moment to confirm that the camera was on and the lens cap was off, Pat snapped several shots in rapid succession. After a glance at the windows and angle of the light, she repositioned herself, then snapped several more.

"Derek, get on in there. I want a picture of the three of you." Pat said quickly.

After giving his ex wife an uncertain glance, Derek did as he was told and took up station between the two boys.

"Perfect! Hold it right there!" Pat said enthusiastically as she snapped more pictures.

"Are you going to have enough film to still take some pictures at your mothers?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Do I have enough of a charge, you mean? I haven't had a film camera since Mark was in diapers." Pat chuckled.

"*Do* you have enough of a charge then?" Derek asked even more slowly.

"Yes. I have extra batteries and disk storage in my camera case. Don't worry, I've got it covered." Pat said as she went through the steps to secure her camera.

"So, is that all we need to do before we leave?" Mark asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Let's pile into the cars and get going." Pat said decisively.

"Who's riding with who?" Derek automatically asked.

It's not that no one had an opinion on the matter, but more that no one wanted to take a chance of offending everyone else by suggesting a plan.

Finally Mark said, "I guess since we won't be able to enjoy the bumpy roads anyway, I can ride with Mom and E can ride with Dad. That way no one has to ride over there alone."

"Bumpy roads?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Remind me and I'll tell you on the way up to Michigan." Mark assured him.

"I'm not sure I want to know." Derek said with a grin at his son.

"If that's all settled, let's go." Pat said to the group.

And so they did.

* * * * *

"Is there anything you want to talk to me about while we've got the chance?" Pat cautiously asked her son.

"So much has gone on in the last few days that it feels like there should be something, but nothing really comes to mind." Mark said honestly.

"It's the same for me. I have the feeling that something's being left unresolved, but I don't know what it is." Pat said helplessly.

Silence fell between the pair for a long stretch of road before Mark finally said, "I'm sorry I did things the way that I did. I wasn't trying to hurt you but I was kind of backed into a corner."

"Your father said that Enoch was trapped someplace bad and that you helped him out." Pat prompted.

"I don't know. I mean, it kinda worked out that way, but most of what I did was for selfish reasons. It just ended up looking like I did something good." Mark said regretfully.

"So you did the right thing for the wrong reason?" Pat asked to confirm her understanding.

"Maybe, yeah. I wasn't really trying to do something *wrong*, but I wasn't trying to do the right thing because it was right, either." Mark mumbled.

"Do you think that if you could go back and do things differently that you would?" Pat asked curiously.

"No. At least, not anything major. I think that things ended up going the best that they could possibly be." Mark said speculatively, then hurriedly added, "If I could change something I guess I'd try to worry more about Enoch's feelings and less about how he looks."

"While I would normally say that honesty is the best policy, in this instance I think it might be better for you to embrace the misunderstanding and try to

live up to the moral standard that you've set for yourself." Pat quietly advised him.

"Since I can't really talk about it, I guess that's really the best thing I can do, no matter how you look at it." Mark said seriously.

"Tell me, do you think that you're the same person now that you were before this whole experience... whatever it was?" Pat asked curiously.

Mark thought for a moment and finally responded, "No. I'm different. I'm not just me anymore, now I'm part of us."

"Then don't obsess over things that happened, regardless of whether they were under your control or not. Those things helped to make you who you are today." Pat suggested.

"Yeah. I guess if *that* caused *this*, then it does kinda make it a little bit better." Mark slowly reasoned.

"If you're ever at a loss for what to do, I'm always as close as the nearest phone. I can talk through it with you and help you find the best outcome." Pat quietly offered.

"Even if you don't know what I'm talking about?" Mark asked with a teasing smile.

"That's probably when I'm at my best." Pat said confidently, then added more slowly, "I'm not sure why that is."

"Well, whatever it is, it works. Thanks Mom."

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Derek was surprised and disappointed in himself at how much he didn't know about current events and recent history.

His intention had been to give Enoch some basic information to help familiarize him with the new century he found himself in, but instead Derek was treated to a fascinating tale of life at the turn of the twentieth century, as told by an eyewitness.

In the end Derek concluded that they would have many opportunities to bring Enoch up to date. At the moment it was more important to enjoy each other's company and make sure that Enoch knew that he was part of their family now.

"I was curious..." Enoch began to say, but trailed off uncertainly.

"Yes?" Derek cautiously prompted.

"Do you really believe that I will be able to find a place in your world where I'll be able to fit in and make a significant contribution to society?" Enoch asked anxiously.

"Yes. Of course I do." Derek said with surprise at the question.

"What can a person who is so disconnected from the rest of the world possibly do?"

"When you put it that way, my first instinct is to say 'politics', but to be honest, I'd be hard pressed to think of anything that you *couldn't* accomplish if you really wanted it."

"So you don't see my lack of knowledge and understanding being insurmountable?"

"The way I see it, the only things that will be insurmountable are the blockades that you set up for yourself. If you convince yourself that you can't do something, then I'm sure you'll find some way to cause that prophecy to be fulfilled."

"I don't even know what the possibilities are. I don't know what to do next. How do I begin this fantastical future that you envision for me?" Enoch asked anxiously.

"Every now and then life will close doors on you that you expected to always be open. Again, this isn't something that's unique to you. It's just the way life is sometimes." Derek said assuringly, then continued, "But speaking to your individual situation, I think the most productive thing that we can do is to secure you a new identity so that you'll be legally recognized as a citizen entitled to certain protections and benefits, including an education."

"My aunt engaged tutors to see to my education up until the time that I was sent to join my mother in Texas. While I know that I will undoubtedly have much to learn, I have read many great pieces of literature, I am well versed in the disciplines of memorization, recitation, ciphering and have a functional grasp of at least the base functions of the higher mathematics." Enoch cautiously offered.

"When it comes to school work, Mark's never been one to push himself. He gets decent grades, but doesn't strive to be the first and the best in his class. From the sound of it, you and he may be able to help each other. I wouldn't be surprised to find that your strengths and weaknesses end up complimenting his." Derek said as they bumped and jostled down the uneven road.

"I like the idea of us helping each other to improve us both." Enoch said happily.

"When you put it that way, so do I."

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When Pat's car pulled up to the gate, Derek pulled right up behind her.

Mark automatically hopped out of the car and ran ahead to open the gate for them both.

As his dad's car passed, Mark noticed another car approaching and waited to see if they were going to pull in.

Mark smiled as he waved for Joe Bob and Lindie to follow his father through the open gate.

Before Mark could make a move to close it, another car got into line behind Joe Bob's.

Mark quickly looked toward his dad's car to find Enoch watching him.

With a wave of his arm, Mark summoned Enoch to join him.

As soon as Enoch was out of the car, Mark signaled for his parents to drive on ahead to the house.

Joe Bob Jr then pulled up next to Mark as the other two boys in his car stared disbelievingly at Enoch.

"Look at who we found." Mark said hesitantly, not knowing what type of reaction to expect from them.

"Are you really Enoch?" Beau asked from the back seat.

"Yes. I am. Did you bring your toy soldiers with you?" Enoch asked gently.

"I think so." Beau answered, then asked his brother, "Joe Bob, is my stuff still in your trunk?"

"As far as I know, your stuff is right where you left it. I haven't moved anything." Joe Bob said frankly.

"We can play soldiers whenever you're ready." Beau told Enoch seriously.

"I will look forward to it." Enoch said with a smile at the younger boy.

"Do you guys want a ride to the farmhouse?" Joe Bob asked uncertainly.

"Yeah, maybe in a little bit. I thought that for now maybe Enoch and I could answer some questions for you before we're inside around everyone and can't talk about certain things." Mark suggested reasonably.

"Are you a ghost?" Beau asked Enoch seriously.

"No. I'm just as alive as you are." Enoch said cautiously.

"He wasn't actually a ghost before, it was just a lot easier to think of him that way than to try to explain it." Mark said frankly.

"Can you explain now?" Joe Bob hesitantly asked.

"We don't really know that much, but we can tell you what we've been able to figure out on our own." Mark said carefully.

"Is Uncle George really alive, like Enoch is?" Beau asked curiously.

"No. He's really dead. But the place where he's at is *for* dead people, so that's okay." Mark slowly explained.

"Are you saying that Enoch isn't dead, but was in a place made for dead people?" Jim Bob asked uncertainly.

"Yes. That's right. His physical body got stuck in a place where only spiritual energy is supposed to go. We got him out of there and he's totally back to normal now." Mark said happily.

"So, when you die, you go to the place where Enoch was?" Joe Bob slowly asked.

"For a little bit you do." Mark responded, sounding to be uncertain.

At Joe Bob's inquiring look, Mark felt compelled to explain, "The way I understand it is, when you die, your spirit kind of hangs around to see what happened... I guess so that you can figure out that you're really dead and see how everything worked out. You know, like closure and all of that. Once you've got your answers, you move on to what's next, whatever that

happens to be for you, the great light or the great darkness or something like that. I don't really know because all we got to see is the limbo place that's behind the veil of this world."

"Is that where Uncle George is now, behind the veil?" Beau asked curiously, obviously struggling to understand.

"Yes. I think that if he was still in this world, that he'd probably get used up or worn out or just fade away or something. But because of the world that he's in, he can be unchanging. He will have the chance to hold on and wait for Allie to be ready to go with him." Mark cautiously explained.

"Do you think Joe Bob and Jim Bob will be able to see Uncle George like we can?" Beau asked hopefully.

"I don't know. Maybe." Mark said, then explained, "Allie said that it runs in our family, so there's a chance. If it weren't for me seeing Enoch, I doubt that I ever would have noticed Uncle George. At first he just looked like a speck of dust to me."

"So there's really a chance that I could 'see' a ghost?" Jim Bob asked curiously.

"Yes. There's definitely a chance of that. But even if you can't, Beau can see them, so he could probably relay messages for you if you needed him to. I bet that being the family historian will be a lot more fun with Beau to help you get people to tell you their stories." Mark said speculatively.

"It gets easier to see them the more you do it. At first I could only see a little bit of Uncle George. Now I can see almost all of him." Beau happily explained.

"But now that Enoch is here, what are you going to do?" Joe Bob asked curiously.

"We're moving back to Michigan." Mark said regretfully.

"But you just got here!" Beau objected.

"Believe me, it's not because we want to." Mark said frankly, then explained, "Since Mom got the job, our only real choices are to go with her to New Mexico or to go with Dad to Michigan."

"You could stay here with us." Beau said with certainty.

"Maybe we could for a week or two, but we couldn't stay here for *years*. Not only would it not be right to ask that of anyone, but Mom and Dad would feel bad about it too. No matter what we want, we'll have to be smart about it and do what's best for everyone. We can't put all our lives on hold just because we can't have everything we want." Mark said frankly.

"It still sucks that you won't be able to stay here with us." Beau grumbled..

"Yes. It does." Mark couldn't help but agree.

"Y'all hop on in and I'll drive you on up to the house." Joe Bob finally said.

"I'll get the gate." Beau immediately volunteered, then ran off before anyone could say otherwise.

Without comment or complaint, the rest of the boys piled into Joe Bob's car and waited for Beau to rejoin them.

* * * * *

"At least Prissy ain't here yet." Beau commented as Joe Bob parked next in the line of cars.

"She will be by the time the food hits the table, I'd wager." Joe Bob said frankly.

Joe Bob sometimes sounded more like his father than even his father did.

"Are you sure that you should let everyone see Enoch? I mean, aren't they going to ask questions?" Jim Bob asked nervously.

"Yeah. But we're going to have to face it sometime, so it might as well be now. The story we're going with is that I found Enoch stuck in a bad situation and helped to get him out." Mark said soberly.

"Limbo?" Beau guessed.

"Yeah, but we're not telling people that part of it. If they ask, we'll say that we can't talk about it... which is true. We're not supposed to tell anyone." Mark said frankly.

"But you're telling us now." Jim Bob said cautiously.

"You already know, at least the part that we're not supposed to talk about. We're just letting you know how it all turned out so you can help us keep the secret... I mean, if you want to." Mark finished shyly.

"Of course we'll help you." Joe Bob said immediately, confirming what a good and decent person he was.

After a moment, Jim Bob timidly said, "But I still don't understand what Enoch is... I mean, where he's from. He's not a ghost, I got that part. But what is he?"

"He's a person just like we are, except that he's been stuck in that bedroom, in limbo, for about a hundred years." Mark cautiously explained.

"A *hundred* years?" Jim Bob asked dubiously.

"I knew Allie, I believe you call her your Great Aunt Alma, when she was a child." Enoch said timidly, trying to illustrate his point to make it easier to understand and accept.

"And Aunt Alma already knows about Enoch, so you don't have to keep the secret around her." Beau said seriously.

"That's right. Allie knows what's going on, so you can feel free to talk around her." Mark confirmed.

"Grandma and Grandpa think that she's off her nut, talking to Uncle George all the time." Joe Bob said seriously.

"Yeah. It'd be nice if we could tell everyone the truth about that, but if we did, I don't think it would help anyone, not Allie, not George, and definitely not Enoch." Mark said frankly.

"That's okay. I like that we get to have a secret that not everyone else knows." Beau said happily.

"People all over the world and throughout history have sought the answer that you are now privy to. Protect that knowledge and realize that with it, you have been granted a great responsibility." Enoch said somberly.

"What responsibility?" Beau asked cautiously.

"First is to keep the secret." Mark said seriously, hammering home that one point. Once he felt assured that the others, Beau especially, had gotten the point, he continued, "Then maybe since we've been given a gift, we might find ways to use it to help people. Maybe those of us who can 'see' spirits can find ways to help the dead without letting the living find out."

"That would be awesome!" Beau exclaimed.

As smiles were shared at Beau's exuberance, Joe Bob led the procession of boys away from the cars and into the house.

* * * * *

The room quieted when the group of boys entered.

"Are you Enoch?" Lindie asked firmly from her husband's side. She had a baby in her arms while Joe Bob was holding two sleeping toddlers, one on either side.

"Yes ma'am." Enoch timidly responded.

"Derek was just tellin us that you was in a bad way and that him and Mark got you out." Lindie said frankly.

"Yes ma'am." Enoch said again, this time slightly more quietly.

"I tell you what. If you figure out that you need *anything*, I want you to call on us. I got more kids than I can count, so whatever it is that you're needin', we probably got a dozen of 'em, layin around the house, in every size and color." Lindie said firmly.

"Yes ma'am, I will." Enoch nearly whispered.

"That's right. But you don't need to be callin me 'Ma'am'. You can call me Lindie or your Aunt Lindie, if you like."

"Yes. Thank you. I would like that very much Aunt Lindie. I would be honored beyond my ability to express to be counted as your nephew." Enoch said seriously.

"Oh, honey! Ain't you just the cutest thing!" Lindie laughed with delight.

"Mama, Enoch's not really related to us, not by blood, is he?" Emmylou asked hopefully.

Mark turned to Jim Bob at his side and said under his breath, "Somebody seriously needs to get that girl some gaydar."